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A Wishy-Washy, Sort-of-Feeling: Episodes in the History of the Wishy-Washy Aesthetic

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Graduate Program in Art History
A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree in Master of Arts
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A WISHY-WASHY, SORT-OF FEELING: EPISODES IN THE HISTORY OF THE
WISHY-WASHY AESTHETIC

Thesis Format: Monograph

by

Amy Gaizauskas

Graduate Program in Art History

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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The School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
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London, Ontario, Canada

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Abstract

Following Sianne Ngai's *Our Aesthetic Categories* (2012), this thesis studies the wishy-washy as an aesthetic category. Consisting of three art world and visual culture case studies, this thesis reveals the surprising strength that lies behind the wishy-washy's weak veneer. The first case study draws out the subtle power in Victorian flower painting by analyzing the work and reception of the successful (though largely unstudied) painters Annie and Martha Mutrie. Subsequently, case studies of Maurizio Cattelan's roaming artwork *Charlie* (2003) and the Andrew Bujalski's mumblecore film *Funny Ha Ha* (2002) bring the discussion into the twenty-first century, when such phenomena as "openness," mumbled dialogue, wishy-washy personalities and filmic devices secure an artwork's place as a commodity in the global art market and as a way for young people to navigate their financial reality, respectively. The wishy-washy proves to be hard to describe, yet unmistakable: a half-hearted, flakey, neither here nor there quality that powerfully refuses to commit and covertly gets under our skin.

Keywords

Wishy-washy, aesthetics, Victorian, flower painting, Martha Mutrie, Annie Mutrie, Maurizio Cattelan, Andrew Bujalski, mumblecore films

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Introduction

Rather than something more “scientific sounding,” psychologist Arnold Goldberg uses “wishy-washy” as a psychological designation in his study “The Wishy-Washy Personality” because it provocatively allows one to “conjure up an image of such a person.”¹ Already, we have a paradox: if “wishy-washy” is indefinite, indistinct, uncommitted, how can it be conjured up? Yet, we know what Goldberg means.

Something similar happens with “wishy-washy” as an aesthetic experience. In the aesthetic register, “wishy-washy” is a judgment call—a “gut feeling”—based on how sensory information makes us feel. Perhaps we can’t define it, but we know it when we see it. This thesis focuses on these wishy-washy aesthetic experiences, specifically on case studies from the art world and visual culture: from paintings, to personalities, to a roving sculpture, to films.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “wishy-washy” as “weak and insipid” in relation to drink or food and “feeble and poor” in relation to a condition or quality of character.² Although an adequate starting point, this definition offers merely a cursory sketch of the type of images connoted by the wishy-washy. By examining three case studies this thesis aims to fill in the gaps of this definition, including how the wishy-washy has changed, what has remained the same and to what ends this aesthetic has been used.

To be sure, as suggested by the Oxford definition, there are strong associations between wishy-washy and conceptions of weakness. However, a certain kind of strength also hides in the wishy-washy’s supposed weakness. Goldberg hints at this. While continuing to expound on the wishy-washy personality in terms of weakness (“In more cases than not, it is a woman who is surrounded by a network of similar words such as weak, insipid and flighty”), he

¹ Arnold I. Goldberg, *A Fresh Look at Psychoanalysis: The View From Self Psychology* (Hillsdale, N.J.: Analytic Press, 1988), 158.

² “wishy-washy, adj. (int. and n.)”. OED Online. June 2014. Oxford University Press.
<http://www.oed.com.proxy1.lib.uwo.ca/view/Entry/229536?redirectedFrom=wishy-washy>.

ultimately defines this personality as one “concerned with adaptation,” suggesting that wishy-washiness can be used tactically.³

As we shall see, the term “wishy-washy” experienced a heightened popularity during the Victorian period and again during our own millennial period. I thus take my case studies from these two distinct eras. However, I am also interested in the emergence and development of the term and, as such, begin my narrative over 300 years ago with a brief consideration of Thomas Urquhart’s English translation of Francis Rabelais’s *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (1532-64).

Translating the first French-to-English version of Francis Rabelais’s mock-epic *Gargantua and Pantagruel* in the mid 17th century, Urquhart replaced the dismissive interjection “tarabin tarabas” with another reduplication, the equally playful yet English-resonating “wishy washy.”⁴ This transformation is noteworthy not only because it is the earliest instance that I can locate of “wishy washy,” but also for the context of the phrase’s use. It appears in *The Third Book of Pantagruel*, a parody of Socratic philosophical dialogue driven by the guileful Panurge’s dilemma of whether to marry. In Panurge’s relentless pursuit of the matter, that he attempts to solve with myriad prognostications (such as rolling dice to point to verses from Virgil and attempts to induce prophetic dreams through half-hearted fasting) and councillors (such as doctors and lawyers, a philosopher, a theologian, a poet and a fool), the question of marriage becomes a rhetorical device that by book’s end remains unresolved.

In the passage where “wishy washy” turns up, Panurge is growing increasingly impatient at the philosopher Trouillogan’s elusive replies to his burning question:

Panurge. But will you tell me? Shall I marry?

³ Arnold I. Goldberg, *A Fresh Look at Psychoanalysis: The View From Self Psychology* (Hillsdale, N.J.: Analytic Press, 1988), 158.

⁴ Francis Rabelais, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, trans. Thomas Urquhart and Peter le Motteux (London: Chatto & Windus, 1921(1693), 186. “Tarabin tarabas” becomes “Wishy washy; Trolly, Trolly.” Randel Cotgrave, *A French and English Dictionary* (London: Anthony Dolle and are to be sold by Thomas Williams, 1673 (1611)), (leaf 4A2_r). The entry for “Tarabin tarabas” reads: “An interjection of interruption, like our pifh pifh, tut tut, &c.” As Anne Lake Prescott notes in *Imagining Rabelais in Renaissance England*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 49, Cotgrave’s dictionary draws heavily on Rabelais use of French with roughly five hundred words originating from his texts and many marked with a “¶Rab.”

Trouillogan. Perhaps.

Pan. Shall I thrive or speed well withal?

Trouil. According to the Encounter.

Pan. But if in my Adventure I encounter aright, as I hope I will, shall I be fortunate?

Trouil. Enough.

Pan. Let us turn the clean contrary way, and brush our former Words against the Wool; what if I encounter ill?

Trouil. Then blame not me.

Pan. But, of Courtesie, be pleased to give me some Advise: I heartily beseech you, what must I do?

Trouil. Even what thou wilt.

Pan. Wishy washy; Trolly Trolly.⁵

Although “wishy washy” has not held up as an interjection, it is curious that even in this early use its dismissive tone expresses an irritation with what is feeble and unresolved. Urquhart could have easily used “pifh pifh” or “tut tut” as Ranel Cotgrave’s well known French and English dictionary suggests for “tarabin tarabas.”⁶ Instead he opts for a reduplication of “washy,” which at that time meant “weak,” no matter if referring to food, drink, literature, colour, painting, livestock or person.⁷ Perhaps Urquhart was picking up on the weakness expressed by Trouillogan. For despite Panurge’s demands for an answer,

⁵ Francis Rabelais, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, trans. Thomas Urquhart and Peter le Motteux (London: Chatto & Windus, 1921(1693), 185-6.

⁶ Anne Lake Prescott notes in *Imagining Rabelais in Renaissance England*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 56-7, that those reading Rabelais would find Cotgrave’s dictionary helpful.

⁷ *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. Vol 19, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 953.

Trouillogan refuses to provide anything other than responses that can be read in multiple ways, leaving a murkiness around what he says.

In any case, Panurge's quest to decide if he should marry occupies the book's entirety. Yet it is never resolved, and no definite judgement on marriage is ever made. Ultimately *The Third Book of Pantagruel* can be read as one long exercise in the type of elusion expressed by Trouillogan in the above passage, wherein, with a comic tirelessness of repetition and floundering, the affective quality of wishy-washy becomes the book's overriding tone.

Furthermore, in Panurge's lengthy preoccupation with something that refuses to be resolved, another aspect of the wishy-washy surfaces. As irritating as wishy-washiness can be, its unfocused wanderings can hold attention for long periods; if an issue is never fully resolved we can neither glean meaning nor move on with decisive certainty. With its endless ruminations, its half-hearted hemming and hawing, the wishy-washy delays meaning and thwarts further action, resulting in a wishy-washy impasse. After all, it is the sheer abundance of Panurge's highly repetitive consultations that result in the third book's emptiness of meaning and lack of narrative progression.⁸ It is as if the narrative is stuck in a spinning wheel—though constantly in motion, it goes nowhere. Considering that issues of marriage were widely discussed and debated during the French Renaissance, *The Third Book of Pantagruel* can be said to exploit this preoccupation, structurally drawing attention to the lack of action associated with prolonged rumination.⁹ In this sense the wishy-washy can be said to be a tactic of evasion, a cog in the wheel of action, lending a backhanded power to what at first glance appears to be an aesthetic of weakness.

It is this tactical, prevaricating quality of the wishy-washy, present even in this early use, that my thesis will highlight. On a surface level the wishy-washy is weak: blurry, watered down, unclear, non-committal, infantile, feeble—it can be “sort-of” many things. However, the wishy-washy aesthetic relies on these weak characteristics to make crucial advances for those who choose to harness its hidden power. Indeed, like the wolf that hides in sheepskin, the

⁸ Terence Cave, *The Cornucopian Text: Problems of Writing in the French Renaissance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 7.

⁹ It is M. A. Screech's *The Rabelaisian Marriage* (London: Edward Arnold, 1958), 5, that identifies the exploitive nature of the third book in regards to the Renaissance's preoccupation with questions of marriage.

wishy-washy often uses its appearance of weakness to cloak its underlying strength. Whether as a strategy of feminine power in the Victorian pastime of painting floral arrangements, a market-orientated disposition geared at driving up the value of an artwork as in the case of Maurizio Cattelan's roaming artwork *Charlie* (2003) or as a grasp at dignity in the face of difficult financial realities for the millennial generation as displayed in Andrew Bujalski's movie *Funny Ha Ha* (2002) and the mumblecore film genre, the wishy-washy's weak positioning can contain surprising power. Its inconspicuous appearance heightens its buried strength—the plain-faced wolf is met by the sheep with a slammed door, but in the guise of a lamb he is welcomed with open arms.

In the contemporary, Post-postmodern world where universals and truth with a capital “T” have all but been diminished (or are out of reach), wishy-washiness as an aesthetic and as a way of navigating reality proliferates. Having been hammered with postmodernism's pluralism and sense of irony, many of the so-called millennial generation who have strong beliefs have been trained to express them ambiguously. To be sure, having definitive opinions risks positioning oneself as an ill-informed, modernist bully and upsetting postmodernism's commitment to multiplicity and relativism. Yet the desire for sincerity and truth remain strong, creating a conflict. In this milieu one can no longer just say what they mean or act directly without social repercussions. This has caused communication to take on many forms of indirection: demurral, passivity, looking away, muddled speech and so on—all indicators of the wishy-washy. To express a strong belief or action or aesthetic, one almost must do the opposite: detract, begin with weakness, play passive, etc. As an aesthetic that asserts itself through its weakness the wishy-washy is perfectly suited to helping us understand this contemporary situation.

However, as much as the wishy-washy resonates presently (and seems like a term created in this century), it nonetheless—as the example of Rabelais shows—has a history that goes back over 300 years. This history is worth examining to see how the aesthetic has changed over time, where its strength lies and what has been achieved in its name. This is certainly the case for Victorian flower painting, a key moment in the aesthetic's history that I chose to illuminate in chapter one “Flower Power: Victorian flower painting and the Mutrie sisters' wishy-washy strength.” In the Victorian period the term experienced a spike in use, surfacing regularly in the most prolific literature of the time. It was often feminized and used to dismiss

what was considered weak-minded or weak tasting or weak in appearance. As we shall see, the wishy-washy aesthetic manifests itself perfectly here in flower painting—a supposedly benign pastime for female “amateur” artists in the domestic setting. However, as I will show, the wishy-washy symbolic value of this “pastime” allowed many women to create meaningful artwork and to enter the professional painting world without seeming to pose any threat to the social order. I take the successful flower painters Annie and Martha Mutrie as a case study, sisters who carved out a name for themselves and helped to open the door for female artists who did not have to paint or act like men in order to thrive.

In the Victorian period the term “wishy-washy” (and the reduplication’s root “washy”) was a popular way to dismiss something as weak, as in watered down or washed out. For example, the term appears in Thomas Chandler Haliburton’s *The Attaché* of 1844: “He is like an over-shot mill, one everlastin’ wishy-washy stream.”¹⁰ Furthermore, having origins in “wash,” a watered down alcoholic beverage, aspects of taste resonate in the Victorian use of “wishy-washy.” For instance in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, Jane comments, “[F]eeling without judgment is a washy draught indeed; but judgment untempered by feeling is too bitter and husky a morsel for human deglutition.”¹¹ Indeed, as a value or taste judgment wishy-washy often conflated weakness with feminine. For example, in Robert Smith Surtees’s *Handley Cross*, a jeering hotel host declares: “None of your flagon-of-ale and round-of-beef breakfasts nowadays—slip-slop, wishy-washy, milk-and-water, effeminate stuff.”¹² Here, as was common of the term’s use in the Victorian period, wishy-washy is a judgment of taste that means weak and feminine.

This sensual aspect of the wishy-washy is carried over into the aesthetic realm when it is used to talk about the quality of colour and painting. For example, in M. E. Braddon’s *Doctor’s Wife*, “Isabel painted wishy-washy looking flowers on Bristol-board from

¹⁰ Thomas Chandler Haliburton, *The Attaché*, Project Gutenberg, (1844) 2009, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/7823/7823-h/7823-h.htm>.

¹¹ Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, Project Gutenberg, (1847) 2007, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1260/1260-h/1260-h.htm>.

¹² Robert Smith Surtees, *Handley Cross* (London: 1st edition, 1843), II. ii. 64.

Nature.”¹³ Meanwhile, in her memoirs, Victorian artist Marie Baskirtseff notes she wants “tender greens....and not wishy-washy yellows.”¹⁴ To be sure, flower paintings, especially those painted in watercolour (where the very literal meaning of wishy-washy as “watered down” resonates in watercolouring’s process of diluting paints with water and the thin wash of their appearance) fit perfectly into what I identify as the Victorian wishy-washy aesthetic.

Indeed, as one review of Tate Britain’s 2012 *Watercolours* exhibition explains:

“*Watercolours* takes on a medium that has historically been associated with wishy-washy flower paintings by Victorian ladies.”¹⁵ As opposed to blatantly strong subjects such as those expressed in history painting or realism, flower painting is preoccupied with a subject that was considered weak. Moreover, as a genre it was considered marginal even to still life, a type of painting already at the bottom of the painting hierarchy. Despite its many associations with Victorian conceptions of weakness, I will show that flower painting could also be used to powerful ends. This is the case when the Mutrie sisters embody the wishy-washy persona of the dilettante who paints mere wishy-washy flowers. Although, to my knowledge, the term wishy-washy was never used to describe either of the Mutrie sisters or their work, I have applied it to argue for the wishy-washy aesthetic powers in weakness. And the widely considered success of the sisters and the power in their paintings, despite working with a weak genre, is my case in point.

Although this thesis begins in the Victorian period to illustrate a prime example of the history of the wishy-washy aesthetic, its final two chapters jump roughly 150 years ahead to our contemporary era. These more recent, early millennial episodes of the wishy-washy examine different aspects of how the aesthetic has developed. Chapter two, “Sort-of Infantile, Sort-of Irritating, Sort-of Many Things: Maurizio Cattelan’s *Charlie*” focuses on a work by one of Italy’s most successful artists, Maurizio Cattelan. Specifically, it looks at a 2003 roving

¹³ M. E. Braddon, *Doctor's Wife*, Project Gutenberg, (1864), <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/35485/35485-h/35485-h.htm>.

¹⁴ Marie Baskirtseff, *Journal of Marie Baskirtseff*, Google Books, (1889), 717-8, <https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=eRcnAAAAMAAJ&printsec=frontcover&output=reader&authuser=0&hl=en>.

¹⁵ Katherine Woodfine, “*Watercolours* at Tate Britain” *Follow the Yellow* (blog), 22 April 2011, <http://followtheyellow.co.uk/2011/04/watercolour-at-tate-britain/>.

sculpture called *Charlie*. I apply the term “wishy-washy” to *Charlie* and Cattelan to describe their infantile, indecisive and infuriating aesthetic—an aesthetic that ultimately ensures their continued and valuable position in the art world. Drawing on the vacillating nature of the wishy-washy in this context, this chapter shows how this aesthetic is prevalent in our contemporary situation. Like the wishy-washy of Victorian flower painting, the aesthetic also contains surprising strength here. As emblematic of the wishy-washy, Cattelan’s *Charlie* irritates its viewer and its meaning refuses to settle easily. Thus its symbolic value sustains the viewer’s attention for long periods, ultimately functioning as a market-oriented strategy in the contemporary art world. Though seemingly worlds apart from the flower paintings of the Victoria era, Charlie’s symbolic weakness turned to powerful ends creates a link. Indeed, the Mutrie sisters and Cattelan both embody the wishy-washy persona of their respective eras.

Further developing the current wishy-washy aesthetic is Andrew Bujalski’s mumblecore film *Funny Ha Ha*. Like Chapters One and Two, Chapter Three, “Eyes on the Stalks of Your Head: Mumbling Towards Dignity in Andrew Bujalski’s *Funny Ha Ha*,” highlights the hidden strength of the wishy-washy. Here, *Funny Ha Ha*’s characteristic mumbled dialogue, spotty audio and passive, indecisive characters create a tone of wishy-washiness throughout the movie. I argue that the wishy-washiness of these characters is best analyzed in terms of their joblessness and the hostile economy. In this context, wishy-washiness becomes a strategy to cope with the precariousness of financial situations for those in their early careers.

Interestingly, as wishy-washy becomes manifest in indecipherable, mumbled dialogue, its original use as an interjection comes full circle (perhaps it has held up as a certain kind of interjection after all). And, as the lead characters that most embody the wishy-washy persona are female, there are many overlaps with the wishy-washy Victorian flower painters—also female trying to succeed in a professional world that seems to shut them out. As well, both the mumblecore movement and flower painting are marginal, the first to mainstream cinema and the second to professional painting, yet both construct more nuanced ideas of femininity. In both cases problematic constructions of femininity are embodied. However there is also agency within this femininity, as I argue the wishy-washiness shows. This resonates particularly within the current wave of feminism—which embraces things like girliness, the colour pink and flowers.

The wishy-washy aesthetic has many important overlaps with different aspects of art theory. It can be situated among broader philosophical discussions, such as existentialism's "bad faith," postmodernism's end of truth and rejection of binary thinking, Gianni Vattimo's "weak thought" and the "open work," as theorized by Umberto Eco.¹⁶ However, as a study of an aesthetic category, the most important theorist for initiating my interest in the wishy-washy as an aesthetic is Sianne Ngai and her book *Our Aesthetic Categories*, a study of the cute, the interesting and the zany. In her examination of the cute, Ngai argues for the importance of studying weak-seeming aesthetics for their powerful, insidious nature. This spurred my curiosity in the wishy-washy that ultimately resulted in this thesis.

At its core, *Our Aesthetic Categories* studies how we make aesthetic valuations and why their study is salient in this period of hypercommodified, information-saturated, performance-driven late capitalism. More specifically it argues that the cute, the interesting and the zany aptly describe current economic conditions because they index consumption, circulation and production. But the book also makes many other subtle yet important observations as well.

For one, despite (or perhaps because of) their marginality to aesthetic theory, the cute, the interesting and the zany call attention to the restricted agency of aesthetic judgments. Where the beautiful is unequivocal, the cute, the interesting and the zany are minor valuations expressing multiple, often conflicting, feelings that contend with their own ineffectuality. To call something cute, interesting or zany leaves open how one really feels towards the thing. In addition, the tension among these valances never settles—unlike the sublime, where the

¹⁶ For connections to "bad faith" see Jean-Paul Sartre, *Essays in Existentialism* (New York: Citadel Press, 1993) 160-4. I loosely connect "bad faith's" refusal to make a choice and ambiguous actions overlapping with the indecisive tendency of the wishy-washy. For Gianni Vattimo's weak thought, that is compelling in name alone, see Gianni Vattimo's *Weak Thought* (New York: SUNY Press, 2012). Vattimo focuses on a philosophically weakened way of understanding ideas. Both weak thought and wishy-washy embrace minor gestures rather than grandiose statements or actions. Although Umberto Eco's *The Open Work* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989) focuses on an artwork's place within the artist-audience dynamic, its concern with openness and the varied readings available to a given work links it to the aesthetic of the wishy-washy.

mixed feelings ultimately are resolved.¹⁷ The wishy-washy, also a minor aesthetic valuation, seemed apt to study in this vein.

Ultimately, though, the task of this thesis is to examine different facets of the wishy-washy, including exploring its manifestation in different media. Thus, while chapter one focuses on the wishy-washy aesthetic in painting, chapter two looks at it in sculptural form and chapter three examines it in film. By choosing these varied media, I hoped to provide a rounded picture of the wishy-washy aesthetic and to uncover “the look” of the wishy-washy regardless of the media used to create it. I ultimately found, however, that the wishy-washy is best understood within the context of its production rather than through its medium. The look of the wishy-washy Victorian painting differs considerably from the millennial wishy-washy film, for example. Yet, the symbolic value of Victorian flower painting still holds wishy-washy purchase on our era. For example, in the work of contemporary Toronto artists Robyn Cummings, Naomi Yasui and Shary Boyle flower paintings and the Victorian personalities that painted them have been taken up. However there is a tint of rose in such images. (They often nostalgically rely on Victorian feminine aesthetics, highlighting both constraint and power while using the formal language of a past era.) Thus, they are not mobilized today as they were in the Victorian period—though these works highlight that mobilization and are still powerful on other levels. In any case, the wishy-washy is less a look that crosses mediums and eras than a sensibility or a register of affect (or of affect’s absence).

Wishy-washiness thus transcends epochs not as a look or a symptom, but as a tendency—in this case, a tendency to embody weakness. What is considered the embodiment of weakness, however, changes—flowers in one instance, mumbling in another. This weakness often leaves the meaning of the work open and ambiguous, which raises the question: Isn’t art wishy-washy by nature? Theodor Adorno would say the most powerful art is uncommitted, ambiguous in its meaning. And this argument will be taken up in chapter two. However, what I focus on in this thesis is something different. It is the specific affective register of the

¹⁷ This summary draws on a book review I published while writing this thesis. See Amy Gaizauskas, “Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting.” Review of *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting*, by Sianne Ngai. *C Magazine* 119, (Fall 2013): 59-60.

wishy-washy, unmistakable yet hard to describe: half-hearted, flakey, neither here nor there, powerfully refusing to commit and insidiously getting under our skin.

Chapter 1

Flower Power: Victorian flower painting and the Mutrie sisters' wishy-washy strength

\

I washed in landscapes from nature (rather say, washed out).

— Elizabeth Barrett Browning, from *Aurora Leigh*

Pigmy seraphs gone astray,

Velvet people from Vevay,

Belles from some lost summer day,

Bees' exclusive coterie.

Paris could not lay the fold

Belted down with emerald;

Venice could not show a cheek

Of a tint so lustrous meek.

Never such an ambushade

As of brier and leaf displayed

For my little damask maid.

I had rather wear her grace

Than an earl's distinguished face;

I had rather dwell like her

Than be Duke of Exeter

Royalty enough for me

To subdue the bumble-bee!

— Emily Dickinson, “My Rose”

As the introductory chapter elucidates, the term “wishy-washy” resonated particularly in the Victorian period, when it became feminized and linked to conceptions of weakness. At times the term became a way to dismiss a woman as frivolous and feeble-minded, especially when the woman belonged or aspired to the upper classes. However, “washy” also referred to weakness in terms of painting or colour, with feminized implications. For example, watercolour painting or light pinks and yellows were referred to as “washy.”¹⁸ While chapter two will pick up on infantile and ambivalent conceptions of the term “wishy-washy,” especially with regard to contemporary art and the idea of openness, and chapter three will further illuminate the millennial generation’s relationship to the term through the mumblecore film genre, all three chapters position weakness at the root of this aesthetic. However, this weakness ultimately maintains a backhanded sense of power.

This chapter takes Victorian flower painting as a case study for the wishy-washy aesthetic—an aesthetic that appears feeble and frivolous. As a highly feminized practice that Victorians considered weak, flower painting and those who pursued this genre, exemplify what the term “wishy-washy” meant. This association with weakness put

¹⁸ “wishy-washy,” *OED Online*, (June 2014, Oxford University Press), <http://www.oed.com.proxy1.lib.uwo.ca/view/Entry/229536?redirectedFrom=wishy-washy>. For examples of this use (noted in the introduction chapter as well): Thomas Chandler Haliburton’s *The Attaché* of 1844: “He is like an over-shot mill, one everlastin’ wishy-washy stream” and Robert Smith Surtees’s *Handley Cross*: “None of your flagon-of-ale and round-of-beef breakfasts nowadays—slip-slop, wishy-washy, milk-and-water, effeminate stuff.”

flower painting in a complicated relationship to the women's movement. However, this aesthetic also held power—in the paintings themselves and for those who painted them—even though, notwithstanding their proliferation in the Victorian period, these works and their artists were not taken seriously and often dismissed. Consequently, despite references by some contemporary artists as noted in the introduction, Victorian flower painting is an area of art history that continues to go largely unrecognized. It is still dismissed as “wishy-washy” and not considered for serious study. Yet, the undercurrent of strength within this aesthetic of weakness makes them quite compelling and worthy of serious attention.

I open this chapter with a photograph of Annie and Martha Mutrie in order to introduce two of the most successful Victorian flower painters and also to set-up what and who is addressed by the Victorian conception of wishy-washy. I argue that the Mutrie sisters mobilize both a wishy-washy identity and a wishy-washy aesthetic in order to forge into the professional painter's world. This leads into a contextualization of the position of flowers in Victorian England, showing the link between flowers and female weakness. However, I also propose the presence of a hidden strength within the flowers-femininity conception that connects this conception to the larger argument of this thesis: that there is strength, though not obvious at first glance, within this ostensibly weak aesthetic. Flowers, women and weakness may be connected here, but there are powerful undercurrents generated by their affiliations. For example, because of the weakness associated with flowers, women were permitted to study them and thus participate in what was a scientific pursuit without obvious disruption to the social order.¹⁹ In the section “Flower Painting: a wishy-washy pursuit,” I establish the position of flower painting within Victorian society and its connection to the wishy-washy. Flower painting rides the line between art and craft and amateur and professional and I argue that despite (or because of) often being dismissed as the work of mere dilettantes (a term that was used to belittle non-professional – and especially women - artists in the Victorian period),

¹⁹ Although the women's movement was making substantial gains for the equality of the genders, this work allowed women to slowly creep into a male dominated sphere under the radar—something that was, perhaps, important to many women who had a more ambivalent relationship to the women's movement.

there is a potential though overlooked power that emerges from their formal composition. Flowers stand out and demand the viewer's attention. As John Ruskin notes: "the forms of flowers...require a painful attention, and restrain the fancy."²⁰ Meanwhile, the women painting them can maintain their femininity while participating in the art world—an accommodation that allows for a nuanced understanding of Victorian gender politics. In the final section of the chapter I return to the opening photograph to consider the Mutrie sisters' painting career. Through their successful critical reception and a formal analysis of some of their work I aim to show how the wishy-washy becomes an aesthetic of strength in their paintings. This chapter highlights a key moment in the history of the wishy-washy aesthetic where it becomes especially feminized, seemingly weak, but, as I argue, to powerful ends.

Let's start with a photograph: Annie sits reading while Martha stands behind, her left hand resting lightly on her sister's shoulder, their matching, heavily crinolined dresses seem to form a single mass (fig. 1). Or is it Martha who reads and Annie who stands? The details of this image, like many of the details of the Mutrie sisters' lives, are unclear. What we do know is that the Mutrie sisters of this mid-nineteenth century photo painted flowers. They were good at it and successful during a time when flower painting was the lowest form of the already low still life genre. Though the painting on display in the photograph is hard to decipher, with the centre oblong shape bursting into a delicate organic handling of paint, it bears the compositional trademark of flowers arranged in a vase. Presumably it was painted by one of the sisters. However, we can't make out the painting's finer details (are those apples? rose blossoms? gathered fabric at the base of the vase?). And even if we had a more favourable view of the image, knowing for certain which of the sisters painted it would be difficult.

²⁰ John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, Vol. 5 (London: J. M. Dent & Co., 1906), 89.



Figure 1. Martha Darley Mutrie and Annie Feray Mutrie, circa 1860, by Maull & Co, © National Portrait Gallery, London

Their styles and subjects were so similar that their paintings, too, are difficult to attribute with certainty from their appearance alone. Thus, in this photograph, we can only look for clues that point to one sister or the other. Perhaps it was painted by the standing sister? After all, the picture is angled away from us to mirror that sister's stance and while the sitting sister reads, the painting is positioned to be the other's leisure pursuit. And right away the contradiction of this photograph, the Mutrie sisters' career and Victorian flower painting in general, becomes apparent. In this carefully crafted composition of sisterhood, leisure and fashion, the sisters embody the image of the Victorian dilettante despite their status as established professional painters. Symptomatic of the wider cultural obsession with flowers and flower painting's unique relationship to budding gender tensions, the persona the sisters embody is regarded as wishy-washy,

weak and amateur—mere wishy-washy Victorian lady flower painters.²¹ Yet the sisters seemed to embody this identity for their advantage, ultimately becoming two of the most successful and well-regarded artists painting in mid-nineteenth century England, as the criticism surrounding their work reveals. Seemingly innocuous, the Mutrie sisters' flower paintings allowed them to forge into the male-dominated, Victorian professional painter's world and the few recorded details of their lives tell a story that speaks to the broader cultural phenomena of amateur flower painters and the quiet power that their pictures radiate.

Flowers in Victorian England

To understand the success of the Mutrie sisters and their flower paintings, and the vogue of flower painting generally, the cherished position that flowers held in Victorian England needs some illumination. This was the era of flower-patterned wallpaper and the language of flowers, the genteel pastime of assigning meaning and messages to floral arrangements based on association. Urban flower markets thrived, as at London's Covent Garden Market and the personal conservatory, where one could retreat with exotic flowers, became an essential requirement for the distinguished Victorian home.²² Rare and riotous blooms were cultivated and popularized in both private and the rapidly expanding public gardens, while homes were filled with live blossoms and their representations, whether dried, sculpted in wax or painted.

Part of the reason for this flower craze was the general interest in the sciences, including botany and its taxonomy, which came on the heels of the Enlightenment, trickling all the way down to the polite accomplishments. The technological advancements of industrialization, too, spurred a longing for and idealization of nature. This along with the

²¹ Katherine Woodfine, "Watercolours at Tate Britain" *Follow the Yellow* (blog), 22 April 2011, <http://followtheyellow.co.uk/2011/04/watercolour-at-tate-britain/>.

²² Tovah Martin's *Once Upon a Windowsill: A History of Indoor Plants*, (Portland, OR: Timber Press, 1989) notes that 50% of middle and upper class homes had an attached greenhouse in 1870, 39.

fascination with and domestication of a diversity of newly “discovered” flora brought home through colonial exchange—showing up not least in the popularity of heavily manicured gardens and miniaturized terrariums—created an atmosphere accented with the feminized loveliness of flowers.²³

Although flowers were closely tied to science, trade and technology—all aspects of the male side of what was considered the divided sphere—it was usually women who brought flowers into the domestic setting. Indeed, the presence of flowers symbolized a woman’s touch. In fact, Victorians used the traditional link between flowers and women to accentuate the differences between the sexes and support the idea of the natural frailty of women.²⁴ For example, John Ruskin’s 1864 lecture on women “Of Queen’s Gardens” uses flowers as a metaphor for woman to exaggerate the idea of femininity as weak and helpless:

She grows as a flower does, - she will wither without sun; she will decay in her sheath, as the narcissus does, if you do not give her air enough; she may fall, and defile her head in dust, if you leave her without help at some moments of her life.²⁵

In this regard the discursive link between women and flowers supported the construction of female weakness that by mid-century was an established way to denote bourgeois femininity.²⁶

However compelling the association among women, flowers and weakness was, there was also an implicit threatening undercurrent to all three categories that their affiliation

²³ Beverly Seaton notes in *The Language of Flowers: A History* (Charlottesville, University Press of Virginia, 1995) that flowers held a particular sentimental significance in Victorian culture. Also see Nicolette Scourse’s *The Victorians and Their Flowers* (Croom Helm, 1983) and Ella M. Foshay’s *Reflections of Nature: Flowers in American Art*, exhibition catalogue (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984).

²⁴ Flora, being the Roman goddess of flowers, women’s names such as Lily and Daisy and the way women were spoken of in terms of flowers, such as “blooming,” all contributed to the women-flower alliance.

²⁵ Cook and Wedderburn (eds) (1903-12), vol. 18, 131.

²⁶ Deborah Cherry’s *Painting Women*, (London: Routledge, 1993), 25, highlights the cult of feminine invalidism that was used as an argument against women working professionally, including as painters.

strengthen. As the story of first-wave feminism has shown, the idea of “woman” and her place in society was in a state of upheaval throughout the Victorian period.²⁷ The women’s movement’s fight towards equality threatened established male dominance and there was a constant push and pull within categories of gender for what could and did define masculine and feminine. This tension meant that establishing and upholding gender roles held a prominent position in society, but it also meant that these roles had the potential to expand and collapse in the turbulence of these cultural winds. For example, how the genders were discursively framed or tactically negotiated could alter what was deemed appropriate behaviour for each category. As such, to participate—and be successful—in the “masculine” domain of work, like the world of professional painting, women often would have to carve out a place that could still be considered acceptably feminine despite its position within the “male sphere.” Thus choosing to paint flowers and associate with a wishy-washy aesthetic, as the Mutrie sisters did, can be considered a tactical career move that increased their success.

Moreover, despite the strong cultural impetus to associate flowers with delicacy and passivity, flowers actually play a powerful, propagating role in nature whose very blatant sexual purpose is in opposition to proper, chaste Victorian society. To put it plainly, the flower is the plant’s reproductive organ. While flowers were considered appropriate subject matter for the polite Victorian lady, the flower’s sexual-biological undercurrent was always present, even if unrecognized. Thus women who engaged in aspects of botany, such as identifying flowers according to the popular Linnaean sexual system of classification, could acceptably discuss reproduction and its parts in detail without being considered crude or unladylike. In other words, for all their associations with femininity and weakness, flowers were one of the few acceptable ways that women could participate in the sciences and talk about sex.²⁸ The association among flowers, femininity and

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ann B. Shteir’s *Cultivating Women, Cultivating Science: Flora’s Daughters and Botany in England, 1760-1860* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), is an in-depth study of the botanical contributions of Victorian women.

weakness thus aided the Victorian woman's ability to participate in such masculine pursuits as the study of the natural sciences.

Flower Painting: a wishy-washy pursuit

Flower painting, too, was a part of the Victorian flower frenzy. In the domestic setting Victorian bourgeois women took up painting flowers as a way to stave off boredom while also displaying status and enhancing their feminine skills, much like needlework or conversational French. By contrast, in the professional setting, flower painting was considered to be a lowly sub-category of the still life, a genre already at the bottom of the painting hierarchy. Coming out of these two contexts, flower painting rode the line between fine and applied art, often requiring critical rhetoric to justify its status.

Professional flower painting's close proximity to its domestically-produced variety meant it needed legitimization. What women were doing in the parlour with arranged flowers and (most often) watercolours was often belittled and denigrated.²⁹ Meanwhile, what men were doing in the studio with oils was praised and elevated. Thus, if the professional artist painted his flowers in watercolours he would be risking further questionable status. The conundrum of how to include such an artist in the professional world was perhaps best exemplified by the problems posed by the work of esteemed water colourist William Henry Hunt. For example, in their influential *A Century of British Painters*, Samuel and Richard Redgrave grapple with the status of Hunt's flower paintings:

Though a close imitator of nature, it was never without selection; and if he made no attempt to add those effects which gave ideality or poetry to his subjects, yet even his objects of still-life were raised almost to the dignity of fine art by the taste with which he rendered them.³⁰

²⁹ Paula Gillett, *The Victorian Painter's World* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 134-9.

³⁰ Samuel and Richard Redgrave 1866, 444.

In Hunt's hands flower painting could be elevated to *almost* fine art status, but more importantly with a twist of critical rhetoric the paintings could sidestep the question of "high art" altogether.

This type of discussion about the status of still life painting was not uncommon, especially concerning a figure like Hunt who was well respected and collected in the art world of eighteenth century England, yet who painted what was considered a low art. The debate played out even in his *Art Journal* obituary:

There are those who call such Art as Hunt practised 'low' art; and, certainly, it is not to be compared, for grandeur, dignity, and great mental power, with historic, or even with the best kind of genre, Art; but, as Hazlitt remarks in one of his critical essays, 'though I have a great respect for *high* art, I have greater respect for *true* art, and the principles involved are the same in painting an archangel's or a butterfly's wings.' That Hunt's fruit and wild flowers—ay, and his chubby-faced boys in round frocks, and girls in pinafores and cotton dresses—are examples of the truest Art, none can deny; and we care not to discuss the question of their admittance into the category of what is generally called 'high Art.'³¹

The argument's logic—although they may not be "high" Hunt's flowers are "true," so what does "high" matter—typifies the critical justification required to distinguish Hunt from the strong association that painting flowers had with weakness. This justification was especially important to set Hunt apart since flower painting was so prolific during this period. It flourished in Victorian England, but among women and amateurs—and that made all the difference.

Though the merits of flower painting could be argued for when Hunt's brush was involved, flower painting was most often dismissed as child-like and weak. This tenuous, yet prevalent, status is exemplified by Ruskin's claim that no great painters painted

³¹ *Art Journal*, 1 April 1864, 114.

flowers, despite his usual support for Hunt. An entire section of *Modern Painters* is devoted to the aesthetics of flowers, yet Ruskin runs through a list of great artists, including Titian, Correggio, Velasquez and Rubens, noting that they all avoid painting flowers. The reasons that Ruskin gives for the absence of flowers from painting's canon are telling. He writes, "All great men like their inferior forms to follow and obey contours of large surfaces, or group themselves in connected masses. Patterns do the first, leaves the last; but flowers stand separately."³² While flowers' supposed function is as mere contributors to the "inferior forms" of a painting's design, they defy this relegation by demanding attention and thus "great men" avoid painting them. Further, Ruskin explains that the beauty of flowers comes from examining their detail and that "the forms of flowers being determined, require a painful attention, and restrain the fancy."³³ So, while flowers are considered weak and minor they actually pose problems by refusing to be weak and minor. Instead of quietly obeying the principles of design, they stand out and require attention.

Beyond these formal, pragmatic reasons, however, the "deepest" reason Ruskin gives for their absence in the work of great artists is that "flowers have no sublimity."³⁴ Rather than inspiring the sublime sensation of awe and terror, flowers provoke weak feelings. Thus, Ruskin concludes:

There is a wide distinction in general between flower-loving minds and the minds of the highest order...to the child and the girl, the peasant and the manufacturing operative, to the grisette and the nun, the lover and the monk, [flowers] are precious always. But to the men of supreme power and thoughtfulness, precious only at times.³⁵

³² John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, Vol. 5 (London: J. M. Dent & Co., 1906), 88.

³³ John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, Vol. 5 (London: J. M. Dent & Co., 1906), 89.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 89-90.

According to Ruskin, flowers not only provoke weak feelings, they are also for the weak (such as “the child and the girl”). But, at the same time, they present a quandary by negating their weakness in their refusal to be easily dismissed on a formal level. The puzzle in this dismissal of flowers in paintings almost becomes a dilemma. Is it too much of a stretch to detect a hidden agency attributed to flower paintings arising, not least, from Ruskin’s somewhat defensive attack on them? Then what is it about flowers in paintings that warrants so much critical footwork? Why go to such lengths to denigrate them, especially when in all other instances Ruskin aims to elevate nature in art? Could there be something more to painted flowers than preciousness and loveliness, something possibly unnerving about their presence in Victorian society?

One possible explanation for the conundrum that flower painting posed is, perhaps, related to a threat men felt by the rise and proliferation of women painters—who largely painted flowers. Flower painting could be integrated into the domestic milieu with ease. It could be done inside with little trouble, and if using watercolours the raw materials were easily available and there was little smell. Thus women, especially middle and upper class women (and some working class women as well) took up painting flowers from home in droves.³⁶ This activity was one of the only opportunities that housebound Victorian women would have to make art, seriously or not. However, the strong association of women’s artistic skills with the polite “accomplishments” taught to genteel Victorian daughters as well as the many satirical images of lady amateur painters popularized by magazines such as *Punch*, along with serious criticism levelled against flower painters, exemplified by Ruskin, ensured that women painting flowers would be stigmatized as mere dilettantes.

Anxious to protect their turf in the world of professional painting, male artists too, would have a vested interest in marginalizing the image of women painters, while propping up the male-artist-genius persona. As such, the female artist was belittled and pictured as an amateur, while also being presented as the subject of the art rather than taken seriously as

³⁶ Paula Gillett, *The Victorian Painter’s World* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 134-9.

its creator.³⁷ Typical of this stereotype is the subject of Samuel Baldwin's *Sketching from Nature*. Here, rather than threatening the male artist's territory, the female artist is presented as the artwork while her sketchbook remains out of view. A grouping of wildflowers directly in front of her, however, suggests that she is painting flowers. Her upper class attire, sketchbook and hat—the latter seemingly momentarily cast aside—present her sketch as a mere pastime and not as a serious pursuit. In fact, the contrast between her fancy dress and the wild landscape suggest that the scene is artificial, an impossible fantasy. In other words, the subject of Baldwin's *Sketching from Nature* is the Victorian dilettante involved in the minor wishy-washy pursuit of flower painter.

Similarly, the popular Victorian satirical weekly *Punch* contributed to the image of the “lady” painter. Again, woman's place in the social order was at stake and thus patronizing images of female artists ensured that they would not be taken seriously and thus they would remain marginalized. This was true even, or especially, as women artists were becoming educated outside of the house at such institutions as The Female School of Art, a school that was established in 1842 to address the female “redundancy” issue by educating women in art so that they may find employment, such as in ornamental manufacturing.³⁸ One such cartoon called “Female School of Art” and sub-captioned “Useful Occupation for Idle and Ornamental Young Men” depicts a group of well-dressed women gathered around a fashionable and seemingly conceited male model, poking fun at the motivation of the female students and their model. It is implied that both the women and the man are involved in this scene as a way to stave off boredom and it should not be taken seriously as a professional occupation: the model is reveling in the female attention and likewise the women are there to dote frivolously over an attractive man.

³⁷ For further discussion of men's images of women in the Victorian period see Susan P. Casteras' (ed.), *The Substance or the Shadow: Images of Victorian Womanhood* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982).

³⁸ In *Women Artists of the Arts and Craft Movement*, (London, Astragal Books, 1980), Anthea Callen notes male jealousy at the superiority of the woman's work coming out of The Female School of Art compared to that of male students at the annual exhibition. This was partially responsible for a new management committee stepping in 1847 and moving the school to an undesirable location.

In her study on gender relations in the Victorian art world, Pamela Gerrish Nunn notes that as the female artist became increasingly economically active in the 1850s, which included the existence of a secondary (woman-painted) art market with more affordable works, she also became increasingly contentious and much energy was put into undermining her. Nunn writes, “In this climate, the female copyist and the female novice were as potent as the female stooge or the female nincompoop...”³⁹ This is when the idea of the amateur flower painter reached its height. Women were regarded as mere copyists and, indeed, copying pictures from magazines was a popular pastime. For example, in the 1850s *The Ladies’ Treasury* ran a regular feature of flower paintings for readers to copy. The feature was introduced by aligning flower painting with the feminine pursuits, but it possibly served as a form of art education for others:

Flower-painting is an art so desirable in itself and so highly prized as a ladylike and truly feminine accomplishment...[O]ur object in presenting subscribers with these beautiful and expensive plates is, not only to gratify that taste for flowers which all ladies possess in a greater or a less degree, but at the same time to excite the curiosity of our floricultural reader by the rarity and beauty of the specimens we select.⁴⁰

However, the idea that flower painting was naturally a women’s domain, as expressed in the above introduction, was one of the reasons why women could acceptably undertake it, even though it was simultaneously undermined in the professional painting world. As such, throngs of women could engage in flower painting seemingly without any challenge to the masculine authority over painting, or the social order at large—and this is one of the places where an undercurrent of power resides within the idea of the wishy-washy aesthetic. Flower painting’s gentle strength is situated among this push and pull of gender politics—it allows grey areas to exist in a woman’s relationship to the women’s movement.

³⁹ Pamela Gerrish Nunn, *Problem Pictures*, (Aldershot Hants: Scolar Press, 1995), 11.

⁴⁰ *Ladies’ Treasury*, 1 April, 1857, 52.

Though flower painting was a genre that honoured a woman painter's femininity rather than disparaged it, the wishy-washy association was often used as a way to dismiss this work as merely frivolous despite it being meaningful and accessible for the women painting it. For example, an *Art Journal* reviewer from 1869 was prompted to comment on the glut of flower painting women, disregarding the practice as a sign of a weak mind: "...It is evident that the innocent department of flower-painting will remain over-stocked until strong-mindedness impels women to study from the life."⁴¹

Flower painting's association with weakness put it in a complicated relationship to the women's movement. Many women felt the need to distance themselves from femininity in order to gain equal ground in the social sphere. This is another reason why flower paintings were "washy" and the women who painted them wishy-washy. Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* is another example of the type of stigma surrounding nature (or flower) painting. As Aurora disdainfully recounts her ladylike upbringing at the hands of her aunt she notes: "I washed in landscapes from nature (rather say, washed out)."⁴² In using "washed" as both a verb and a decidedly sneering adjective she implies that watercolour painting is an indicator of weakness while conflating nature painting with weakness. It is only upon discovering her father's book collection that Aurora feels she receives an intellectual education.

That femininity hinders women's rights to equal education and refraining from it was the only way to achieve success was a popular Victorian belief, especially among women. As Aurora looks to her father's books for her true education, successful women often honed masculine attributes such as dressing like men or painting "male" subject matter. The French realist painter Rosa Bonheur was one such artist. Bonheur is infamous for wearing men's clothes and painting in a masculine style. She is also considered the most successful female artist of the Victorian period.⁴³

⁴¹ *Art Journal*, 1 March 1869, 82.

⁴² Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996), 1.422-3

⁴³ Gretchen Van Slyke, "The sexual and textual politics of dress: Rosa Bonheur and her cross-dressing permits," *Nineteenth-Century French Studies* v. 26 no. 3-4 (Spring/Summer 1998) 321-35.

However, the Mutrie sisters painted flowers *and* were also successful, as the following section will show. On a formal level their paintings often dominated the picture plane and demanded the viewer's attention by standing out. Though flower painting was often belittled, the Mutrie sisters' paintings and their identities show us that the wishy-washy aesthetic can ultimately contain strength that cannot be so easily dismissed. As Emily Dickinson's "My Rose" suggests there is a particular power in flowers. Though her rose is "meek," it is also "lustrous." In fact, there was "Never such an ambushade." The weak and fragile appearance and association that flowers connote are not all there is to them. In fact, the common link between flowers and weakness distracts from the actual power in their beauty—they are designed to seduce the bumblebee, after all. And, like Dickinson's poem, the Mutrie sisters' careers show that, ultimately, there is a power in subduing the bumblebee, in weak feelings, in the wishy-washy.

The Mutrie Sisters: *Where the Bee Sucks*

If we compare the opening photograph (fig. 1) with another portrait of the Mutrie sisters (fig. 2) the stiffness of the first image becomes especially apparent. While both photographs play on Victorian whimsy and have the sisters angled towards one another, dressed in heavily crinolined dresses that are made of an identical satin fabric, an underlying seriousness escapes the former while the second image captures a tone similar to Baldwin's *Sketching from Nature*, which was painted at roughly the same time.



Figure 2. Annie Feray Mutrie and Martha Darley Mutrie, circa 1855, by R.A./Prudence Cuming Associates Limited, courtesy of Royal Academy of Arts, London

However, in the first photograph there is added strength in the formal connection between the sisters—their dresses appear to be joined by the three matching wide ribbons of darker material that caps their layered skirts. Although the details of the shirts vary slightly in design of fringe and pleat the overall effect is that the sisters are a single form. This ultimately produces a weighty sculptural effect that is further embellished by the selectively sparse background and the draped single layer of heavy fabric in the upper right corner which, like the fabric of the sisters' dresses, almost appears to be made of marble, a reversal of the sculptural trope of carving stone to resemble fabric.

This being still early in photographic technology the sitters were no doubt required to hold this carefully crafted composition for a lengthy period. Maybe this is why the stiff and serious tone overrides the picture despite the inclusion of accoutrements of feminine pastimes, attempted “at-ease” stances and the dress of leisured ladies. More likely, though, both the powerful tone and the feminine details were considered aesthetic decisions. After all, the second portrait was taken several years earlier than the first and its relaxed and soft atmosphere effortlessly comes across. For example, the light from the

window softly diffuses across the relaxed faces of the sisters, who stand with ease as they delicately paw a basket of fruit and flowers. The later photograph includes the dilettante identity tropes (consistent with the earlier portrait and no doubt because of conventions that governed studio portraits at the time), but it also importantly emanates a serious overall tone to create a tension that oscillates between relaxed and stiff, whimsy and serious, and weak and strong—and, knowingly or not, this can be read as symbolic of the Mutrie sister's career and the subtle power of the wishy-washy in Victorian flower painting.

Martha Darley Mutrie was born 1824 and Annie Feray Mutrie in 1826 in Ardwick near Manchester, where their Scottish father was in the cotton trade. They were educated at the Manchester School of Design and their work was exhibited at the Manchester Institution beginning in 1845, while they worked from a studio in Chorlton-cum-Hardy. After successfully debuting at the Royal Academy (Annie in 1851, Martha in 1853), they moved to London in 1854. They continued to exhibit annually at the Royal Academy, and to show regularly at the British Institution, the National Institution at the Portland Gallery and the French Gallery, among others.⁴⁴

Though they were considered to be the best flower painters of their time, we know little of the Mutrie sisters now and details of their life and career are scarce. Perhaps this is in part because of the customary practice for female artists, especially flower painters, to be self-effacing. Ellen Clayton's 1876 compilation *English Female Artists* comments on her brief encounter with the sisters: "These ladies have invariably declined, from feelings of delicacy, to make any particulars of their life public."⁴⁵ We do know that the sisters never married and lived and worked together in London. They were often thought of as a pair and when written about it was most often together.

Their paintings usually grouped together a bouquet of flowers, sometimes set against interior fabrics and furniture while other times set against mosses and grasses or dramatic

⁴⁴ Pamela Gerrish Nunn, *Problem Pictures*, (Aldershot Hants: Scolar Press, 1995), 37.

⁴⁵ Ellen Clayton, *English Female Artists* (London: Tinsley, 1876), vol. 2, 289.

skies. Though many of their paintings could be interchangeably attributed to either of the sisters (for example, fig. 3 and fig. 4), it was usually Martha who painted the more dramatic settings—she often increased the size and detail of the foregrounded flowers while distancing and muting the backdrop, creating a soft focus, while Annie provided a more even rendering between foreground and background. For example, the flowers in Martha’s *Rhododendrons* take up more than half of the total picture plane, while offering a distant vanishing point just to the right of the bouquet that lends a vastness to the foreboding sky. Annie’s *Still life with flowers on a rocky ledge*, on the other hand, offers us similar subject matter, flowers arranged on a flat rock surface with a cloudy sky in the distance, though the tone is much lighter and the flowers are more integrated into their setting (fig. 5).



Figure 3. Martha Mutrie, *Orchids*, circa 1860, image courtesy of Bonhams



Figure 4. Annie Mutrie *Cactus*, circa 1860, image courtesy of Bonhams



Figure 5. Annie Mutrie, *Still life with flowers on a rocky ledge*, circa 1860, image courtesy of Bonhams

The similarity between the Mutrie sisters' work was no doubt caused, at least partially, by their close working proximity. However, their shared upbringing and closeness as sisters must have also been partly responsible. In any case, the symbolic weight of sisterhood figured heavily in their critical reception and career. As is clear from the two portraits of the sisters, they were thought of as a pair and their work was often exhibited, considered and purchased together.⁴⁶ In fact, the sisters-flower painters identity emerged alongside the earliest discourse surrounding their work. In 1854, the same year they moved to London, the *Art Journal* critic noted the similarity between the sisters' work:

[Martha Mutrie's *Spring Flowers* are] Very simple in arrangement, but it is seldom that we see flowers painted in oil with so much vigour, accurate

⁴⁶ The Royal Academy Exhibition records shows their co-exhibition tendency, while their work's criticism rarely mentions one sister without at least referencing the other. And, many collectors would buy from both sisters. For example, they were both collected by Augustus Egg and John Ruskin, *The Times*, 20 May 1863, 20; An interesting letter signed by Annie that appeared on ebay notes: "We are sending the two little paintings as you wished - without frames - the consequence is that when you send a cheque for Darley's and my benefit you must be kind enough to do so for thirteen gs [guineas] each instead of the fifteen before mentioned," http://www.ebay.co.uk/itm/Annie-Feray-Mutrie-Victorian-painter-botanical-ALS-/161121530655?nma=true&si=fgpzCKh%252FG212wmkGN84JGfeMpx0%253D&orig_cvip=true&rt=nc&_trksid=p2047675.12557.

drawing, good colour, and decided manipulation. There is another similar picture equally well executed; it is No. 479, 'Orchids and other Flowers,' by Miss A. F. Mutrie. The ladies are, we understand, sisters: and it is rare indeed to find so much of merit in one family.⁴⁷

Critical acclaim that connected the sisters and their work continued to follow them throughout their career. For example, in his *Notes on the Principle Pictures in the Royal Academy*, John Ruskin couples and underhandedly compliments them: "I cannot say more of the work of the two Misses Mutrie than I have said already. It is nearly as good as simple flower-painting can be."⁴⁸ The discourse surrounding the sisters and their work was often used not only to group them together, but also to express their superiority to all other (female) flower painters, especially Mary Moser, one of only two early female members of the Royal Academy whose work was considered the golden standard of flower painting—that is, until the Mutrie sisters began exhibiting. For example, William Powell Frith's chapter on "Lady Artists" in his 1889 autobiography notes that "...Mrs. Moser [has been] far surpassed by the Misses Mutrie of our day."⁴⁹ And, *The Times* art critic in 1865 writes:

Looking at these glowing and gorgeous pieces of flower-painting, one cannot but recall that the Academy had a certain lady painter of flowers among its original members, and wonder what worthiness there was in Mary Moser that is not present, in ten-fold the strength, in either of the Misses Mutrie...⁵⁰

To say that both the Mutrie sisters' work was ten times as strong as Mary Moser's work was a great honour to be sure. They may have been painting flowers, an aesthetic that

⁴⁷ *Art Journal*, 1 June 1854, 168.

⁴⁸ John Ruskin, *Pre-Raphaelitism and Notes on the Principle Pictures in the Royal Academy* (London: The Waverly Book Company, Ltd., 1920), 97.

⁴⁹ William Powell Frith, *My Autobiography and Reminiscences* (London: Richard Bentley and Sons, 1889), 469.

⁵⁰ *The Times*, 18 May 1865, 6.

was considered weak, but their work was clearly considered powerful and their identity as sisters made them that much more of a force.

Like the multifaceted trope of sisterhood in the Victorian period, Martha and Annie's identity as sisters could play up their femininity while simultaneously increasing their social power. In the mid-to-late nineteenth century the idea of sisters held a complicated resonance for all aspects of the social sphere. Sisterhood was not only symbolic of the preciousness of home life and wishy-washy frivolity, but it also signified the economic pressures of the "female redundancy problem" as well as the social upheaval of the burgeoning women's movement. Likewise, though the Mutrie sisters play up the wishy-washy flower painter persona, contributed to not least by their identity as sisters, as observed in portraits of them and through their critical reception, they also had powerful, long-running careers, where many other female artists did not.

Though much writing considers Annie and Martha's work and lives as interchangeable, there are noted examples of divergences of opinion that, perhaps, their identity as sisters—think rivalry and nuanced sibling comparisons—also strengthen. While the sisters were both thought of as at the top of their game, there are instances when Martha's superiority seems to reign, especially in their work's critical reception. For example, the *Art Journal's* critic wrote in 1861 that although he would "rather not be rude enough to show a preference...Miss A. F. Mutrie...must give way to her elder sister, as all other [female] flower painters who exhibit must give way to both."⁵¹ Indeed, though they both exhibited and sold their work, Martha's tended to garner more attention and praise and she was asked to jury awards at the Female School of the Art.⁵²

There was one extremely influential critic, however, that favoured the work of Annie over Martha. John Ruskin's *Notes on the Principle Pictures in the Royal Academy*

⁵¹ *Art Journal*, 1 June 1861, 114.

⁵² For examples of their sales figures: *The Times*, 20 May 1863 describes a "flower piece, comprising azaleas and geraniums, small cabinet size by Miss Mutrie – which sold for 55 guineas;" *The Times*, 27 February 1877, 4, lists *Cactus* by Miss A. F. Mutrie, 1865, exhibited at Paris – sold for £74; *The Times*, 16 December 1867, 12 and *The Times*, 27 April 1871, 12, describes Martha sitting on the committee that awarded the Queen's gold medal in the Female School of Art's prize for their respective years.

continually commented on and praised Annie's work, while Martha's was often overlooked completely or merely given a passing nod by including her name and the work's title but no further observation. This is notable especially since Martha was often considered the superior of the two sisters. However, even Ruskin's praise of the younger of the two sisters' work often is belittling and paternalistic. For example, of her *Flowers* at the 1855 Royal Academy exhibition he writes:

There are two other works by this artist in the rooms, Nos. 304 and 306. It would be well to examine them at once in succession, lest they should afterwards be passed carelessly when the mind has been interested in pictures of higher aim; for all these flower paintings are remarkable for very lovely, pure, and yet unobtrusive colour—perfectly tender, and yet luscious—(note the purple rose leaves especially), and a richness of petal texture that seems absolutely scented. The arrangement is always graceful—the backgrounds sometimes too faint. I wish this very accomplished artist would paint some banks of flowers in wild country, just as they grow, as she appears slightly in danger of falling into too artificial methods of grouping.⁵³

Though he finds the backgrounds “too faint,” take heed of Ruskin's praise of Annie's use of “*unobtrusive colour—perfectly tender...always graceful.*” When Ruskin wishes she painted banks of wild flowers does he have in mind an image similar to the sketcher in Baldwin's *Sketching from Nature*—a dilettante in the woods? This image would certainly fit well with the sisters' portrait that was likely taken the same year (fig. 2).

Though I regrettably cannot locate Annie's *Flowers*, Martha showed a painting at the 1855 Royal Academy exhibition called *Azaleas*, which I believe to be represented here (fig. 6). *Azaleas* is bright and bold in colour. The flowers are robust and detailed, while the surrounding ground and sky are faint and unarticulated, serving to pop the

⁵³ John Ruskin, *Pre-Raphaelitism and Notes on the Principle Pictures in the Royal Academy* (London: The Waverly Book Company, Ltd., 1920), 57.

foregrounded blossoms further. Though *Azaleas* did not garner comment from Ruskin, the *Athenaeum* critic noted: “There is a ladylike poetry about every touch, yet without feebleness or weakness.”⁵⁴ The bold yet feminine handling that the *Athenaeum* critic admires in Martha’s *Azaleas* is much different than the unobtrusive tenderness that Ruskin finds compelling about Annie’s *Flowers* of the same year.



Figure 5. Martha Mutrie, *Azaleas*, 1855, image courtesy of James Alder Fine Art

Here is Ruskin again the following year on Annie’s *Roses* at the 1856 Royal Academy exhibition: “...the only bettering it is capable of would be by more able composition or by the selection, for its subject, of flowers growing naturally. Why not a roadside bank of violets?”⁵⁵ And, in 1857, he becomes almost didactic on her *Autumn Flowers*:

This lady’s work is always beautiful; but there is some incongruity
between the luxuriant evidence of education in the group of central

⁵⁴ *Athenaeum*, 17 February 1855, p. 208.

⁵⁵ John Ruskin, *Pre-Raphaelitism and Notes on the Principle Pictures in the Royal Academy* (London: The Waverly Book Company, Ltd., 1920), 97.

flowers, and the roughness of the ferny bank they rest upon. All true lovers of art, or of flowers, would rejoice in seeing a bank of blossoms fairly painted; but it must be a bank with its *own* blossoms, not an unexpected picnic of polite flowers in the country. Neither need the sky be subdued in colour. I believe the most beautiful position in which flowers can possibly be seen is precisely their most natural one; low flowers relieved by grass or moss, and tree blossoms relieved against the sky. How it happens that no flower-painter has yet been moved to draw a cluster of boughs of peach blossom, or cherry blossom or apple blossom, just as they grow, with the deep blue sky between every bud and petal, is more than I can understand; except that I know art, the likeliest and properest thing for everybody to do is almost always the last that will be done.⁵⁶

Not only is Ruskin again commenting on Annie's insufficient sense of naturalism in her handling of flowers, but also that there is a discrepancy between foreground and background. Ruskin would like the flowers to stand out less. And, in 1858 he reprimands her *Reynard's Glove* for its artificiality and apparent mistitling with the wrist-slap-like remark: "Very pretty, indeed, Miss Mutrie, as usual; but you know those are perfect dwarfs of foxgloves. Bud, bell, and seed, I counted 148 on one stem last summer...and an average foxglove that has at all enjoyed its life, will always have seventy or eighty."⁵⁷

Similar to his diatribe on flowers in paintings from *Modern Painters*, his fascination and his consternation with Annie's work stems from the incongruity between the expectation of flowers in painting to simply be graceful and benign and their refusal to do so. This is key to the power of the wishy-washy within their work: by painting flowers that stand out and demand attention their weakness becomes superseded by their power to prolong the viewer's gaze; they essentially oscillate between weakness and power and cannot easily settle into either category. By propping up Annie's work, the slightly less successful and

⁵⁶ John Ruskin, *Pre-Raphaelitism and Notes on the Principle Pictures in the Royal Academy* (London: The Waverly Book Company, Ltd., 1920), 147-8.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 191.

less dramatically bold of the two sisters, he seems to be attempting to take her under his wing and sway her to his understanding of flowers and nature in painting. Swayed Annie was not. If anything, in the following years, both her painting and the painting of her sister took more risks, distancing themselves further from the naturalism which Ruskin sought.

We can see the progression of the sisters' boldness through the reception of their work and through some of their paintings that can be accessed. For example, in 1859, the year following Ruskin's condescending remarks about Annie's *Reynard's Glove* the *Art Journal* critic noted in an entry discussing Martha's *Garden Flowers* "...[the] firmness of manner, powerful colour, and natural condition and circumstances characterizing the works of this lady are refreshing to those wearied with the everlasting prim drawing-room arrangements that prevails (sic) among our flower-painters."⁵⁸ *Firmness of manner, powerful colour*: This is strong acclamation for a lady painter of flowers indeed. However, it is Annie who comes out on top, with the praise she receives for *Travellers' Joy*: "Miss A. F. Mutrie, is, perhaps, even more attractive than the former: both are of surpassing excellence."⁵⁹

A few years later in 1863, Martha seems to have responded to Ruskin's criticism of Annie's *Reynard's Glove* by painting the especially bold *Foxgloves*.⁶⁰ Of the sisters' work in the Royal Academy exhibition where *Foxgloves* appeared the *Art Journal* critic writes:

The colours here culled and concentrated, outvie the rich costumes with which they may come in contact. Among several pictures painted by these ladies, we especially noted 'Foxgloves' (466), by Miss M. C. Mutrie, a careful outdoor study, the stately flower-heads standing nobly, and glowing gloriously, out from a bed of ferns. —By the sister,

⁵⁸ *Art Journal*, 1 June 1859, 171.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ I believe this painting to be the one referenced in *Art Journal*, yet misattributed to Annie and dated 1864 somewhere along the way.

Miss A. F. Mutrie, 'Autumn' (495) is an equally careful transcript of heather, ferns, and meadow-sweet, set in a woodland background.⁶¹

Foxgloves, one of the boldest paintings by either of the Mutrie sisters, can be viewed as a response to Ruskin's earlier criticism. I can imagine Martha saying with it: "you think you know foxgloves, I'll give you foxgloves!" The blossoms seem to jump off the canvas, hovering aggressively over the viewer's space. The upward thrust of the robust stem and downward hang of the blossoms implies that the viewer is beneath the flowers as they hang powerfully overhead. These are flowers, but they are not weak. The *Art Journal* critic picks up not only on this but also on how both of the sisters' colours "culled and concentrated" outvie their "rich costumes." The flowers pop, while the background recedes into an abstract blur, but most importantly the handling of paint becomes the subject of the painting itself. Again, we don't have Annie's *Autumn*, but according to this very astute critic it is equally well-crafted and we can assume just as "noble." In any case, what is clear is that *how* the sisters are painting significantly overrides *what* they are painting. This could almost be read as a metaphor for the way the sisters mobilize the wishy-washy aesthetic itself—their "colours" or boldness begin to supersede their "costume" or wishy-washy identities and subject matter.

Into the 1860s the titles of Annie's paintings also became bolder and more suggestive of narrative. For example, in 1860 she painted *Where the Bee Sucks*, a very provocative name for a painting of flowers that seems out of character when compared to the usual descriptive titles for flower paintings. Although the painting is lost to us, the *Art Journal* reviewer wrote of it: "Who in the days of Richard Wilson, nay, in those of John Constable, would have believed that such a brilliant effusion of the palette could come of a piece of limestone with its crown of gorse gemmed with even its brightest flowers?"⁶² Again, her painterly skill and use of colour are notable. Again, the work is better than some of England's greatest painters. However, this time the work does not simply outshine fellow female flower painters, but great male landscape artists.

⁶¹ *Art Journal*, 1 June 1863, 114.

⁶² *Art Journal*, 1 June 1860, p. 171.

Meanwhile Martha was continually called to aim higher and try landscape painting by the *Athenaeum* critic Fredrick Stephens: “Miss Mutrie improves in the grace and brightest of her flowers, and needs only more ambition to surpass most of her predecessors...Miss Mutrie is becoming quite the Rosa Bonheur of azaleas. We hope soon to hail her the queen of landscape...Miss Mutrie’s flowers and insects are so good that to name her is to praise her. We should like to see her try landscape.”⁶³ There is some unauthenticated evidence that Martha did take heed of this advice. An undated drawing bearing her signature sold on Ebay earlier this year. This drawing is a landscape of Cavendish House among trees and lists her as the artist. It is impossible to verify if this is in fact her work, but it is a nice little drawing that would make a nice enough painting. However, it contains nowhere near the power and boldness that resonates from her flower paintings.

That the Mutrie sisters’ success made them important symbols as Victorian women painters, especially for the many “lady flower painters” working from home, is noteworthy. Though it is difficult to weight the impact of their symbolic importance, they did become household names and to “do it like a Mutrie” meant something.⁶⁴ Subsequent Victorian female artists saw them as supportive role models, too. For example, the successful Victorian portrait painter Louise Jopling testifies to the support she received from other female artists: “The women I met—few in those days—were encouraging too: Mrs. E. M. Ward; Miss M. E. Edwards; and the Misses Mutrie, the clever painters of flowers.”⁶⁵ The Mutrie sisters were also among the artists who famously petitioned the Royal Academy to open the school to women. Along with other female artists, the sisters signed and sent a letter with their request to each of the forty Academicians in April 1859, it was also published in the *Athenaeum* that month.⁶⁶ The symbolic value of the

⁶³ *Athenaeum*, 17 May 1856, p. 622; *Athenaeum*, 8 May 1858, p. 597; *Athenaeum*, 21 May 1859, p. 683.

⁶⁴ *The Englishwomen’s Review of Literature, Science, and Art*, 24 December, 1859, Issue 96, 309, published an article that notes that the Mutrie name is “familiar to every-one.” Indeed, “Mutrie” was referred to in popular literature with the assumption that the reader would understand the reference. For example, a poem published in *Punch*, 25, May 1867, 210, that pokes fun at the elaborate and ostentatious hats worn by ladies at exhibitions notes, “Miss Mutrie’s flowers seemed to pale besides the milliner’s gay blooms.”

⁶⁵ Louise Jopling, *Twenty Years of My Life: 1867–1887* (London: John Lane, 1925).

⁶⁶ “The women’s petition to the Royal Academy of Arts,” *Athenaeum*, 30 April 1859, 581.

sisters was also called upon in order to argue against the ban on women as members of the Academy. For example, in his 1866 Academy review the *Times* critic notes them among a list of established and worthy painters in order to call for the inclusion of women: “With Mrs Ward, Miss Edwards, Miss Osborn, Miss Swift, the Misses Mutrie, Mme Jerichau, Miss Wells, Miss Martineau, Miss Blunden, Mrs Robinson and Miss Dundas among the painters here...it is time that the Royal Academy should be reminded that its original list included Mary Moser and Angelika Kauffmann. It is much to be hoped that in the proposed extension of the Association class the ladies will not be forgotten.”⁶⁷ As the ban on women continued into the later Victorian period, rebel members of the Academy put forward the names of some women artists during the elections of the 1880s, including Annie and Martha Mutrie.⁶⁸

Indeed, as the Mutrie sisters’ career progressed the “lady flower painter” stigma receded from their critical reception and they could finally be considered working in the same arena as William Hunt. For example, a critic for the Universal exhibition of 1873 said that Martha’s work is: “...the very perfection of flower-painting, to be owned without a blush by either William Hunt or Miss Mutrie and that is no scant praise.”⁶⁹ Furthermore, in the hands of the Mutrie sisters flower painting could be elevated to high Art status, as one critic noted in his *Art Journal* review upon examining a painting by Annie: “[She is] an artist who has but one rival, her sister, in a branch of Art that never fails to gratify: even mediocrity so applied is welcome; but the Misses Mutrie have elevated the painting of flowers into high Art, and have reached a degree of perfection that distances all competitors.”⁷⁰ Annie and Martha Mutrie ultimately achieved what even Hunt could not, while still taking into account their identity as sisters and the fact that they paint flowers!

⁶⁷ *Art Journal*, 1 June, 1866.

⁶⁸ Pamela Gerrish Nunn, ed., *Canvassing: Recollections by Six Victorian Women Artists* (London: Camden Press Ltd., 1986), 94 and *Victorian Women Artists* (London: The Women’s Press, 1987), 48.

⁶⁹ *Art Journal*, 1 October 1873, 314.

⁷⁰ *Art Journal*, 1 September 1870, 287.

Mobilizing the wishy-washy as an aesthetic of flower paintings and as an identity for the women who painted them helps us to see the not-so-obvious power that resides within both. Flower painting and its painters, though prevalent throughout the Victorian period, were dismissed as weak and frivolous, yet at the same time both were doing important work for women under the cover of this supposed feebleness. Often positioned as minor, amateur and, even, in opposition to the women's movement, this work was important for the women who painted it and it enabled women painters, such as the Mutrie sisters to maintain their sense of femininity while at the same time aiding their career and their painterly development. Flower painting from the Victorian period remains understudied. This is possibly due to only seeing the amateur and weak side of its wishy-washy aesthetic. But, as I show, there is another side to the wishy-washy that keeps the term in motion and also activates the work that relies on it. Though the aesthetic is cloaked in weakness, there is undercurrent of strength that draws the viewer in and refuses to settle—as either feebleness or power. Flower painting posed problems for critics like Ruskin in the Victorian period, and, as the following chapters will show, the wishy-washy can be traced to the contemporary where it continues to confound and remains unsettled, yet there is a strength in that.

Chapter 2

Sort-of Infantile, Sort-of Irritating, Sort-of Many Things:

Maurizio Cattelan's *Charlie*

Extraordinarily hot and humid, the opening weekend of the 50th Venice Biennale had art world cynics suggesting that the work would be judged based on the presence of air-conditioning in the pavilions.⁷¹ In particular, the Giardini, the gardens on the tip of Venice that comprise the biennial's national pavilions, "became a giant sauna."⁷² Italy's most infamous art world trickster, Maurizio Cattelan, could not have planned a better situation in which to unleash his latest piece than the muggy atmosphere enveloping the biennial's swarm of overheated but determined art enthusiasts. As it happened, *Charlie* (2003), a remote-controlled boyhood version of Cattelan on a blue tricycle, rode recklessly around the outdoor gardens with a big grin, obliviously bumping into the throngs of people and utterly unaffected by the sweltering heat.

Like the persona projected by the artist himself, much about this roving sculpture exemplifies the wishy-washy sensibility. Its fluid, polyvalent meanings locate it firmly within postmodernism's field, suggesting important links to such influential concepts as Jean-Francois Lyotard's metanarratives and Fredric Jameson's post-modern condition, as well as important precursors like Sigmund Freud's uncanny as the following section will elucidate.

Indeed, *Charlie* fits into a cultural phenomenon that has been broadly accepted since the rise of postmodernism: the loss of grand narratives and stable meaning. However, although this sensibility cloaks *Charlie*, the story does not end with postmodernism. A strange convergence of Theodor Adorno's theory of commitment in art with Sianne Ngai's argument for the power in weakness suggests that the wishy-washiness exhibited

⁷¹ Carol Vogel, "Heat Upstages Art at the Venice Biennale," *New York Times*, (June 16, 2003), E1.

⁷² Ibid

in *Charlie* functions as a market strategy for the millennial period. In the contemporary art world context wishy-washiness can powerfully reify value in art. As art critic Peter Timms writes in his book *What's Wrong With Contemporary Art*, “the wishy-washy vagueness of personal insight and enlightenment” brands art as difficult, thus securing its place in the market as a luxury good.⁷³ I apply the term “wishy-washy” to *Charlie* and Cattelan to describe their infantile, indecisive and infuriating aesthetic—an aesthetic that ultimately ensures their continued and valuable position in the art world.

“Just as annoying as the real thing”

“Just as annoying as the real thing,” one spectator pronounces in a YouTube video that follows *Charlie* as it weaves through the garden’s paths in Venice.⁷⁴ “He wins,” art historian James Meyer declares in David Rimanelli’s recounting of his biennial experience for *Artforum International*. “The piece is so obnoxious,” Rimanelli notes: “The creepiest element is the bobbing head...”⁷⁵ Meanwhile Alison Gingeras, also in *Artforum*, called *Charlie* the “top ADD-friendly entry,” reporting that, with this piece, Cattelan “‘triumphed’ over his coexhibitors.”⁷⁶

What makes *Charlie* successful yet irritating, seemingly benign yet insidiously under the skin of those who encounter him, relates to this piece’s “wishy-washiness.” As with the Victorian period, in this early millennial context wishy-washiness flows from an apparent weakness of character, meaning and form. Here, the weakness manifests as happy-go-

⁷³ Peter Timms, *What's Wrong With Contemporary Art* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press Ltd., 2004), 72-3.

⁷⁴ “GalleryBeat – Maurizio Catalan’s Fake Kid on a Trike,” [n.d.], video clip, accessed March 16, 2013, YouTube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i-kJauoiMoQ>.

⁷⁵ Rimanelli, David. 2003. Entries: David rimanelli. *Artforum international*, <https://www.lib.uwo.ca/cgi-bin/ezpauthn.cgi/docview/214345911?accountid=15115> (accessed March 18, 2013).

⁷⁶ Gingeras, Alison M. 2005. Stealing the show. *Artforum international*, <https://www.lib.uwo.ca/cgi-bin/ezpauthn.cgi/docview/214340691?accountid=15115> (accessed March 18, 2013).

lucky-shaded indecision and infantilism. Art critics read this weakness into *Charlie*, but it also functions in the work to powerful ends.

It is unclear whether *Charlie* laughs at biennial culture and the art world or nods sincerely to infantilism's insights; whether it cleverly situates art in the everyday or gratingly, narcissistically cops-out of the whole thing—or whether it does all of these things and more. This last option in particular—*Charlie*'s apparent weak alliance to various options—makes the sculpture wishy-washy. As the art critic for the *Los Angeles Times* describes it:

Charlie is a modest work. The boy looks mischievous, but don't expect him to pop a wheelie. He is capable of only minor, puppet-like effects—an anxious rocking of the tricycle's pedals, a twisting of the handlebars and eyes that scan the room. The latex skin and shaggy hair might be expressive, but when he rolls up silently behind a museum visitor, nobody will mistake him for a real live boy. Instead, he's a boy-toy.⁷⁷

Charlie's various minor registers generate its “wishy-washy” aesthetic. The work oscillates easily among many different resonances, leaving the meaning of *Charlie* open. This openness suggests strong theoretical alliances with “the open work” as theorized by Umberto Eco. As with “the open work,” *Charlie* has openness inscribed into it by its author (Cattelan), but with a predetermined range, allowing various completions by its audience. Eco's theory of “the open work” has paved the way for weaker aesthetic categories in general and for the collaborative nature of a work of art's creation and reception. This trajectory has many implications for the varied readings available to works like *Charlie* and the pluralism of postmodernism in general. However, my focus on *Charlie* will be on the presence of these varied readings together without completions—or, rather, that *Charlie*'s conflicting valances do not settle. Furthermore, my analysis centers on the wishy-washy aesthetic—a specific aesthetic experience,

⁷⁷ Christopher Knight, “‘Charlie’ gets the point at MOCA: Art can be fun,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 22, 2003, <http://articles.latimes.com/2003/jul/22/entertainment/et-knight22>.

although it at times sits within the range of “the open work.” *Charlie*’s relationships to its various meanings are weak; they can be read as displaying an “I couldn’t care less” attitude—all indicators of the wishy-washy in this context.

Irritating though *Charlie*’s unsettled and vague meanings may be, the work resists both easy affirmation and dismissal. Its meaning remains in play for the viewer, who will struggle to digest the work and quickly move on, as the biennial circuit encourages visitors to do. Furthermore, *Charlie*’s minor alliances to many meanings allows the work to shift easily among various contexts—from high profile biennials to established art museums to expensive auction houses. This wishy-washy aspect of *Charlie* functions as a powerful market-oriented strategy. Moreover, in this way, *Charlie* links to a malaise often seen infecting other aspects of contemporary culture (such as art criticism), a concern that will be taken up in the chapter’s conclusion. This broader context, in turn, positions *Charlie* as both embodying and functioning as a metaphor of the wishy-washy, providing a pathway to the consideration, in chapter three, of wishy-washy as an attribute of millennial culture more broadly, taking cinema as a signal example.

While wishy-washiness is often thought of, and indeed presents itself, as a position of weakness, it ultimately provokes powerful reactions. Tellingly called a “juvenile iteration of the artist’s subconscious” in the catalog for Cattelan’s retrospective at the Guggenheim, the cumulative effect of *Charlie*’s wishy-washy presence, his heedless grin and aimless wandering, for example, provokes disdain from viewers. (Recall, again, one visitor’s remark that it is “just as annoying as the real thing”⁷⁸ or Rimanelli’s charge that “the piece is so obnoxious”).⁷⁹ Indeed, *Charlie*’s wishy-washiness can be said to reflect, but also stir-up, repressed aspects of the viewer’s innermost self.⁸⁰ The wishy-washiness results in a minor irksome indecision made manifest by *Charlie* but also shared by the

⁷⁸ “GalleryBeat – Maurizio Catalan’s Fake Kid on a Trike,” [n.d.], video clip, accessed March 16, 2013, YouTube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i-kJauoiMoQ>.

⁷⁹ Rimanelli, David. 2003. Entries: David rimanelli. *Artforum international*., <https://www.lib.uwo.ca/cgi-bin/ezpauthn.cgi/docview/214345911?accountid=15115> (accessed March 18, 2013).

⁸⁰ Nancy Spector, *All* (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2012), 70.

unconscious of both Cattelan and his irritated audience and indicates a deep-seated facet of the psyche. Indeed, *Charlie* raises the fundamental dilemma of indecision: on the one hand, if you don't make up your mind about something, if you don't make a definitive choice or choose a definitive direction, then all possible options are still available. On the other hand, in leaving the choice unmade you choose nothing and do nothing. As such, indecision is an infuriating situation to experience, but also to behold. Thus, the wishy-washy aesthetic that *Charlie* embodies actually has powerful undertones in its effect, as seen in responses from its audience. Cattelan seems to provoke this fury in his viewers, playing on why indecision and ambivalence rub us the wrong way.

Sigmund Freud considered the things that annoy us about other people to actually be the things that we are most annoyed with in ourselves, calling this phenomenon the narcissism of small differences.⁸¹ In this sense, *Charlie* can be understood as a manifestation of the annoying part of the viewer's inner psyche. Indeed, both literally and figuratively, he embodies the mini-person inside who cannot make up their mind, who is irrational and childish and wears a dumb grin, while circling around like an aimless kid on a tricycle. As such, *Charlie* becomes a clever metaphor for this type of hidden infantile insecurity that is related to ambivalence, but also, even more so, a clever metaphor for the unexpected power of the irresolute—precisely because of the strong reaction its absence of commitment provokes.

Like many of Cattelan's figurative works, *Charlie* is made from resin and silicon to create its wax-museum-like appearance. *Charlie*, though, also rides around on a real tricycle, situating him beyond the static "hyperreal" of many of Cattelan's previous Madame Tussaud-styled sculptures. With *Charlie*, the art becomes a part of everyday life. That the tricycle is the same one ridden by Danny, the psychic child from *The Shinning* (1980), connects the viewer to *Charlie* through a shared cultural reference,

⁸¹ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1961), 61.

furthering the “art into life” aspect.⁸² So too, when *Charlie* causally bumps into passersby, or is touched by them without reprimanding, the lines between art and life, institution and audience, expected art viewing behaviour and spontaneity are blurred. At the same time, though, given that the 50th Venice Biennale where *Charlie* made his debut is also famously remembered as the biennial where Relational Aesthetics broke out into the art world mainstream with the “Utopia Station,” a neighbourhood of social interaction, complete with a community garden and communal showers, this roving artwork is only tamely integrated into the art into life movement.⁸³ *Charlie* still requires an operator; despite being a moving sculpture, his every movement is controlled. Unlike much of the other successful work exhibited at the 50th Venice Biennale, *Charlie* does not create human-based relationships with his audience. After all, he is not even human. By not fully committing to the “art into life” movement *Charlie* also importantly creates affects that conflict with the tenants of Relational Aesthetics: it provides social interaction but, rather than inviting, it is irritating. Thus, although *Charlie* crosses barriers between art and life, in the context of the global biennial art scene his blurring of boundaries is merely a minor gesture. *Charlie*’s wishy-washiness is importantly present in this “not quite real” status and thus “not quite life” into art as he refuses to commit to any one art movement or meaning—instead he has merely loose affiliations with many.

And, what’s to be said about *Charlie*’s relentless grin, his eyes that shift from side-to-side? As with the half-hearted references to “art into life,” this “happy-go-lucky” appearance is also ambiguous; it sits in contrast to the impending dread resonating from the tricycle’s reference to the rather creepy knowingness of Danny’s character in *The Shinning*, who similarly rides his tricycle, but who rides with purpose. Here, echoing Danny’s perceptive abilities, *Charlie* can be said to refer to Freud’s notion of the uncanny. Simply put, for Freud, the uncanny is a strange, yet familiar fear—more specifically, a fear developed in infancy, based on a knowledge that later becomes

⁸² Massimiliano Gioni, “All Work and No Play Makes Jack a Dull Boy,” in *The Wrong Times*, 2003, <http://www.phillips.com/detail/MAURIZIO-CATTELAN/NY010710/6>.

⁸³ Jacob Dahl Jürgensen, “50th Venice Biennale” in *Frieze*, Issue 77, September 2003, http://www.frieze.com/issue/review/jacob_dahl_juergensen/.

repressed and finally reappears.⁸⁴ In the movie, Danny seems sensitive and eerily perceptive about the coming events and his manic riding around the hotel-cum-house where his family is living, signals his awareness of the impending horror to befall the family, despite the adult world's ignorance of it. With this citation in mind, what impending dread might *Charlie* foretell? Perhaps, as Massimiliano Gioni, the curator of the 2003 Venice Biennale, notes, *Charlie* represents the pressure Cattelan felt to participate in the biennial, and, more generally, the pressure Cattelan feels from the expectations that the art world has of him. In his curatorial essay Gioni writes: "Cattelan created *Charlie* in an attempt, both actual and metaphoric, to escape from the public eye and the ever-present fear of spectacular failure that spectacular success brings. Ducking and weaving around the exhibition, Cattelan fashioned his artwork into a moving target — one that was both harder to grasp, and harder to shoot down."⁸⁵ Gioni also notes that *Charlie* "critique[s] the exploding interest in both the creation and spectacularization of international art biennales."⁸⁶ Throughout his career Cattelan has expressed his distaste for the responsibility he feels as an artist. In fact, he first became an artist as a way to avoid any responsibility, but he soon realized that this career path, too, was riddled with many duties and roles that he was required to fulfill, such as participating in biennials.⁸⁷ Read this way, *Charlie* speaks to the doom experienced by Cattelan when faced with the expectations of the art world and Cattelan's desire to evade art world responsibilities and judgments. Yet it retains a sense of ambivalence since Cattelan still willingly participates in that world. This complicated situation could be said to contribute to the wishy-washy aesthetic that *Charlie* displays.

⁸⁴ Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," in *Writing On Art and Literature* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1997).

⁸⁵ Gioni, "All Work and No Play Makes Jack a Dull Boy,"

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Francesco Bonami, Nancy Spector, Barbara Vanderlinden and Massimiliano Gioni, *Maurizio Cattelan* (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 2003).

However, this reading does not really account for the fact that *Charlie* is a mechanical doll—and not just any doll, but a double of Cattelan. Highlighting that *Charlie* is both a doll and double takes us back to the uncanny in reference to *The Shinning*, most obviously situating him in relation to Freud's primary example of the uncanny: E. T. A. Hoffmann's short story "The Sandman." The uncanniness in "The Sandman" does not arise, as one might expect, from Olympia, the human-like doll who can be said to embody a very literal interpretation of the uncanny-look, but from the recurring theme of the sandman, a character who tears out children's eyes.⁸⁸ Freud uses this example because, despite the presence of a human-like doll character, the story's uncanniness definitively does not arise from her, as he is at pains to note. After much analysis, working through the details of the story's uncanniness, he concludes, "While the Sand-Man story deals with the excitation of an early childhood fear, the idea of a 'living doll' excites no fear at all."⁸⁹ Here, he wants to show that the appearance of a look-a-like doll has nothing to do with the uncanny. However, later in the essay Freud backtracks when he admits that there *is* an uncanniness in look-a-like dolls, but this has more to do with the fact that they function as doubles and not to do with intellectual uncertainty related to whether or not the doll is alive.⁹⁰

Thus, Freud expresses an unclear (dare I say, wishy-washy) logic when explicating the connection between human-looking dolls and the uncanny. Cattelan's *Charlie*, in being a look-a-like doll, inevitably evokes a relationship to the uncanny, but not in a clear-cut way. Instead, it is a specific yet ambiguous relationship to the uncanny. Thus, if we were to definitively subscribe to the uncanny implications of this reading, we would be eschewing *Charlie*'s oblivious grin that, arguably, has more to do with the ambiguity—or what I would go as far to call Freud's wishy-washiness—in this uncanny relationship than uncanniness itself.

⁸⁸ Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," in *Writing On Art and Literature* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1997), 202.

⁸⁹ *Ibid*, 204.

⁹⁰ *Ibid*, 208.

Charlie is wishy-washy indeed: if he does not fully align with the “art into life” movement or the uncanny, is he then a joke, a parody of art as entertainment? Or he is, perhaps, a sincere expression of Cattelan’s infantile side? Maybe the difficulty with *Charlie* stems from this lack of coherence: the work does not definitively seem to be or mean any one thing; instead as an emblem of wishy-washiness, it displays loose connections to many ideas and resonances. This model of fluid, polyvalent meaning that *Charlie* displays belongs to the postmodern discourse. Jean-Francois Lyotard, for one, identified the impossibility of an underlying consensus and the inevitability of differences in *The Post Modern Condition* (1984). Summarizing his argument, Lyotard writes: “Simplifying to the extreme, I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives.”⁹¹ His argument, along with the arguments of Michel Foucault and others, showed how truth (particularly those truths related to science) tautologically relies on its own system to determine what counts as its proofs. Thus, the substantiation of truth is flawed, despite the weight historically given to truth’s authority, and any claims to truth should remain suspect—or at least be regarded as ultimately unprovable.⁹² If Foucault and Lyotard show us that truth is categorically troubled, one of Fredric Jameson’s contributions has been to show us that the by-products of truths are also troubled.

Take, for example, the parody. Its joke or mock hinges on the existence of a truth that it sets itself in relation to. In *Faking It*, Jane Roscoe and Craig Hight’s study of Mockumentaries, Jameson’s critique of parody’s ambivalent situation in a postmodern world is explicated. Since there is no longer any truth to critique in postmodernism, parody loses its critical edge. They write: “In postmodern relativism there is no such normative discourse to critique. Jameson argues that in postmodernism this critical potential of parody has been neglected and we are left with images that are constantly

⁹¹ Jean-Francois Lyotard, “Introduction” in *The Post Modern Condition in Art in Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, edited by Charles Harrison and Paul Woods. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 1122.

⁹² Though of course the “realist” counter-argument also has its proponents, as exemplified by Hilary Putnam’s classic essay “Brains in a Vat.”

recycled and reused.”⁹³ With no truth to mock, parody, such as Cattelan’s supposed use of *Charlie* to critique art’s reduction to entertainment within the biennale setting, falls flat—or at least is not the critical genre one might expect it to be. Instead, parody moves in the direction of ambivalence, maintaining an ambiguous relationship to the subject of its mockery. Roscoe and Hight explain that parody

characteristically offers up more than one meaning. Parody texts are therefore double-edged, and any normative discourse can be both victim and model for the parodist...The parodic text, then, is both object and subject of its criticism and can be read as both against the object of criticism and as sitting alongside it. In this way, we can think of the parody...as most characteristically embodying ambivalence and ambiguity.⁹⁴

This mixture of parody, critique and ambiguity relates to Cattelan, most obviously in his relationship with the art world. As Gioni notes, Cattelan uses parody to comment on the art world, often citing other artists in his jokes and expressing his inability to fit in.⁹⁵ However, even if this outsider positioning is not all a ploy, it contrasts starkly with the artist’s actual insider reality: Cattelan is one of today’s best-known and highest-paid artists. Consider, for example, his retrospective at the Guggenheim in 2012, or that one multiple of *Charlie* (there are three in the edition) sold for \$2,994,500 at a 2010 Phillips auction.⁹⁶ Thus his parody of the art world, though highlighting some of its problematic aspects, ultimately is also deeply aligned with it. Craig Hight highlights another dimension of parody’s ambivalence in a further study on mockumentary, *Television Mocumentary: Reflexivity, Satire and a Call to Play*. Hight points out that parody is

⁹³ Craig Hight and Jane Roscoe, *Faking It: Mock-documentary and the Subversion of Factuality* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), 29-30.

⁹⁴ Ibid, 30.

⁹⁵ Gioni, “All Work and No Play Makes Jack a Dull Boy,”

⁹⁶ Phillips Auction, “Maurizio Cattelan,” <http://www.phillips.com/detail/MAURIZIO-CATTELAN/NY010710/6> (accessed March 18, 2013).

ambivalent because it contains both authority and transgression. Even in mocking, it reinforces the formal terms of the thing that it mocks.⁹⁷ For example, when Cattelan mocks the art world, he continues to use the art world's formal constructions: its venues, its audiences, etc. This drives home the tension of Cattelan's insider-outsideness; he makes jokes about the art world from within the art world; he seeks to escape the art world, all the while leaving traces of these escapes for the art world to grapple with.

Considered from a slightly darker angle, also drawing on the flawed nature of truth in a postmodern world, is the idea that the notion of "the fake" substantiates the idea of truth—or provides a cover for the absence of truth. Taken to its darkest extreme, as Jean Baudrillard obligingly does in "Simulacra and Simulations" (1998) among many other texts, this argument is set on obliterating both truth and reality. Take Baudrillard's discussion of Disneyland: if Disneyland is a fake, infantile reality, it provokes the assumption that a true reality exists somewhere else. He writes:

Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real...The Disneyland imaginary is neither true nor false: it is a deterrence machine set up in order to rejuvenate in reverse the fiction of the real. Whence the debility, the infantile degeneration of this imaginary. It's meant to be an infantile world, in order to make us believe that the adults are elsewhere, in the 'real' world, and to conceal the fact that real childishness is everywhere, particularly among those adults who go there to act the child in order to foster illusions of their real childishness.⁹⁸

⁹⁷ Craig Hight, *Television Mocumentary: Reflexivity, Satire and a Call to Play* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010).

⁹⁸ Jean Baudrillard, "Simulacra and Simulations," in Jean Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, ed. Mark Poster (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 166-184. Published on The European Graduate School website. <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/jean-baudrillard/articles/simulacra-and-simulations/>. Worth noting, he subsequently makes a similar argument about art in "The Conspiracy of Art."

In this sense, Disneyland can be said to act in the same way that a parody does in postmodern times. In many ways a parody depends on the expectation that there is a “truth” to critique—and in doing this parody reinstates the notion of truth itself, despite its seemingly critical guise. As such it can be read as an insidious, yet (or, and therefore) powerful support of the thing it purports to critique. Thus Cattelan’s infantile joke on the art world and its entertainment park-like atmosphere (after all, one of *Charlie*’s strongest resonances is that of being the typical theme park-type attraction of the entertainment industry) oscillates from being a weak critique to its powerful opposite: a validation of the art world realness at the expense of everywhere else’s relegation to the hyperreal. This is where the power of the wishy-washy begins to come into play with *Charlie*. Although using the language of post-modernism, that is not where the story ends for *Charlie*. Signaled already by its creation in the early millennial period, the art world presence and value that Cattelan and *Charlie* hold undercuts any of their supposed weakness.

At its core, in fact, and although it is achieved through its appearance of complex multiplicity *Charlie* (and Cattelan) maintains a strong singular meaning: driving up symbolic value and extreme art world participation. And, if *Charlie*’s meaning is related to the “cultural industry,” whether in support or feigned opposition or both, surely Theodor Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory* (1970) can help shed some light on the nature of its power. In fact, if we can consider Adorno’s concept of “uncommitted” art to be a type of wishy-washy art whose meaning or “truth content” is not overt and cannot be understood literally and, thus, cannot be digested, understood and dismissed (or co-opted and put to opposite uses) in one fell swoop, he, indeed, has a lot to say about the power of wishy-washiness in art and its relationship to the cultural industry. In “Commitment,” for example, Adorno writes about the problems inherent in art with a clear message: “...commitment often means bleating what everyone is already saying or at least secretly wants to hear. The notion of a ‘message’ in art, even when politically radical, already

contains an accommodation to the world...”⁹⁹ Here, he is, once again, referring to, but also refining, his famous saying that “to write lyric poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.”¹⁰⁰ For, as he explains, by a twist made possible by the cultural industry the horrific is turned into entertainment. Using Arnold Schönberg’s *Survivor of Warsaw* as his example, he writes:

...by turning suffering into images, despite all their hard implacability, they wound our shame before the victims. For these are used to create something, works of art, that are thrown to the consumption of a world which destroyed them. The so-called artistic representation of the sheer physical pain of people beaten to the ground by rifle butts contains, however remotely, the power to elicit enjoyment out of it.¹⁰¹

Instead, he argues that there is a critical power in autonomous art—an autonomous art that is related to ambivalence with its lack of decisive messages. As such, one of Adorno’s main arguments is the implication that agency can be preserved within the ineffectuality of the benign. Thus, a “wishy-washiness,” as exemplified in *Charlie*, contains more power than if the piece had a “message” per se, one way or the other. In his essay “Is Art Lighthearted?” Adorno further explicates how the “weakness” of uncommitted art is, ultimately, potent. For Adorno, true art is neither lighthearted nor serious, but an oscillating combination of both that never reconciles itself. Or, better still, as Adorno writes, art

tak[ing] all its material and ultimately its forms from reality, indeed from social reality, in order to transform them, thereby becomes entangled in reality’s irreconcilable contradictions. It measures its profundity by whether or not it can, through the reconciliation that its formal law brings

⁹⁹ Theodor Adorno, “Commitment” in in *Art in Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, edited by Charles Harrison and Paul Woods. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 782

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 779.

¹⁰¹ Ibid, 780.

to contradiction, emphasize the real lack of reconciliation all the more.

Contradiction vibrates through its most remote mediations...¹⁰²

Indeed, reality, truth, is not simply made of one meaning that can be universally encapsulated and represented in an easy package to swallow. Thus, only art that maintains the mutability of meaning can truly capture the tensions, be they lighthearted and serious, of life. As such, Adorno concludes his essay with the observation that the only contemporary art worthy of moving forward unmarred by the cultural industry is art that is neither lighthearted nor serious but, rather, art that is “cloaked in obscurity.”¹⁰³

Of course, context is everything, even when dealing with “autonomous” art. Just as Adorno’s theories of aesthetics are a reaction to the Holocaust and the various social and political moods and conditions surrounding its aftermath, so too, when we consider a contemporary work such as *Charlie*, must the conditions surrounding its creation and display be assessed to understand its meanings and effects. Tellingly, the same line of argumentation that concludes that ambiguity in art distances it from the cultural industry in one context is the very thing that secures its market orientation in another.

Sianne Ngai has written perhaps the most thorough account of the type of loose or weak aesthetic categories, prevalent in contemporary times that can help to unpack the implications of *Charlie*’s ambiguity. Although *Charlie* might not fit into the categories of aesthetic valuation that Ngai describes in detail in *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (2012), the work relates to these categories by its shared lack of intensity—and obscurity. Rather than aesthetic categories such as the beautiful or the sublime, these categories arise from seemingly ambivalent feelings towards the object. In fact, for Ngai, rather than a negation of culture, these ambiguous categories relate to the “increasingly

¹⁰² Theodor W. Adorno, “Is Art Lighthearted?” in *Notes to Literature*, Trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991–92), 249.

¹⁰³ Ibid, 253.

intimate relation between the autonomous artwork and the form of the commodity.”¹⁰⁴ Beyond the implications of the artwork’s relationship to consumer culture, an important aspect of Ngai’s study, taken as a whole, is the fact that it subjects aesthetic categories of weaker intensity to scholarly analysis. Always aware of the continuum and complexity of aesthetic experiences themselves, Ngai writes with an awareness of the range of possible effects, both overall and existing within a single category. For example, in the case of the cute, Ngai explains this category provokes an array of feelings from tenderness to aggression to domination. As with *Charlie*, what is at first glance a passive statement invoking passive feelings like “how funny,” has stronger, darker, emotions underlying it.

Charlie as an emblem

As seen during the opening weekend of the 50th Venice Biennale, *Charlie*’s aimlessness (both his wandering through the gardens and his wandering through various meanings, the former perhaps a figure for the latter) sustained the attention of the uncomfortably hot and notoriously fast-paced art world audience. Considering the short time audiences spend with artworks, this is a real achievement. For example, one recent study on this phenomenon found 17 seconds as the median time spent looking at an artwork.¹⁰⁵ And, despite all the claims about Cattelan’s annoying character, he still is one of today’s most famous, and most purchased artists. Perhaps the wishy-washiness present in Cattelan’s work and emblemized with *Charlie* relates to the oft-used marketing technique to employ surrealist tropes: what confounds us sustains our attention. Or perhaps the various meanings of *Charlie* have the potential to appeal to a larger audience, generating more discussion and symbolic value. It also could be that the general mistrust of truths has

¹⁰⁴ Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2012), 2.

¹⁰⁵ K. Smith and Lisa F. Smith, Jeffery, “Spending Time on Art” in *Empirical Studies of the Arts*, Vol. 19, Issue 2, 229-236.

filtered into the culture industry and what this more “intelligent” audience craves is art that oscillates on many levels, from the reality-fiction continuum to the much postulated irony and sincerity range. In this sense ambivalent art is the example par excellence of the culture industry’s deepest desires. In any case, Cattelan’s *Charlie* embodies and seems to be a metaphor for ambivalence and indecision. Significant in itself, but *Charlie* is also emblematic of a general wishy-washiness that has filtered into much of contemporary art. This is exemplified in a variety of art practices, from the heavily publicized, media stunt-like performances, such as Tilda Swinton’s recent restaging of *The Maybe* (2013), where the actress slept in a glass box at New York’s Museum of Modern Art to the pervasiveness of current trends such as so-called abject modernist “movement” in painting, where high modernist-style work is created with a “junk-yard” or lazy aesthetic (these art works tend to be sloppy and offer minor gestures rather than grand statements, yet they often receive wide acclaim). This general wishy-washiness can also be read into current art criticism. For example, in what has been called “the crisis of art criticism” claims such as “there is actually nothing critical about it” and that it is “ineffectual” have been made; it often functions purely on descriptive terms leading many to dismiss it as merely another aspect of the ever-agreeable art market). But, wishy-washiness also permeates culture at large, with the phenomena surfacing in everything from Facebook’s “like” option (there is no “dislike” option to click and the “like” does not even definitively connote a positive opinion that the liker must commit to, just a mild acknowledgement) to the multi-screen tendency of sociability (one no longer has to choose where one wants to be, if one can be multiple places or “everywhere” at once). Perhaps all this relates to weak citizenship or weak sociability in general, or maybe it relates to a dispersed sense of subjectivity. As the political collective Retort would have it:

The modern state...has come to need weak citizenship. It depends more and more on maintaining an impoverished and hygienized public realm, in which ghosts of an older, more idiosyncratic civil society live on. It has adjusted profoundly to its economic master’s requirement for a thinned, unobstructed social texture, made up of loosely attached consumer subjects...Weak citizenship, but for that very reason the object of the

state's constant, anxious attention—an unstoppable barrage of idiot fashions and panics and image-motifs, all aimed at sewing the citizen back (unobtrusively, 'individually') into a deadly simulacrum of community.¹⁰⁶

Applying Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* to the contemporary world, Retort importantly names the dangers of weak citizenship that can be applied to wishy-washy inaction.

In any case, by not taking a stand, we delay action. We suspend forward movement—a state of affairs where the implication multiplies the wishy-washy gesture. This, too, can be read with a range of meaning, from liberating to tactical to obnoxious to lazy. In the end, though, at least one thing becomes clear: wishy-washiness, despite its seemingly innocuous presence, is a powerful contender in contemporary life and culture. The following chapter takes the mumblecore film movement as an example of how the aesthetic can be mobilized in contemporary life.

¹⁰⁶ Retort, *Afflicted Power* (London: Verso, 2005), 21.

Chapter 3

Eyes on the Stalks of Your Head: Mumbling towards dignity in Andrew Bujalski's *Funny Ha Ha*

Marnie: Hey, if you could move anywhere, if you were moving out of here, just anywhere in the country, or anywhere I guess, where would you move?

Alex: I dunno. I guess a better question is: if you were thirteen feet tall, would you rather be that or have eyes on the stalks of your head?

- *Funny Ha Ha*

The pilot episode of the popular television series *Girls* (2012) famously begins with lead character Hannah getting fired from her internship after asking her boss if she can be hired on as a paid employee. Likewise, Frances, of the film *Frances Ha* (2012), works up the courage to ask for more work with the dance studio where she apprentices only to later be told they don't need her after all. These scenes reference their lesser-known predecessor *Funny Ha Ha* (2002), a film in which the lead character Marnie also gets fired because she asks her boss for a raise. Both the films and the television show make light of a very real and serious problem for many of the so-called millennial generation, particularly recently graduated women: the expectation that they will be happy and able to work without pay and the difficulties of finding stable, remunerative, full-time work. At the same time a seemingly insurmountable level of debt saddles many recent graduates. Consequently, those who cannot afford to work for free or juggle multiple part-time, minimum wage positions (i.e. those without a trust fund or parental safety net that extends past their university years to subsidize their early career) struggle to avoid getting left behind.

Though *Funny Ha Ha* perceptively initiates this trope, *Frances Ha* and *Girls* round out and develop its various aspects, highlighting how a person might navigate this dire

situation. Besides the lead characters all being young and newly-graduated women in difficult financial positions, all three also are socially disorganized, scattered and cannot seem to get their careers started. A *Reel Film News* critic says of *Frances Ha*, although it could pertain to all three works: “everyone in this movie is entirely wishy-washy.”¹⁰⁷ *Frances Ha*’s similarities to *Girls* and *Funny Ha Ha* are, in fact, frequently pointed out—so much so that Greta Gerwig, who is a co-writer and plays lead character Frances in *Frances Ha* has been asked to speak about it in interviews.¹⁰⁸ And, another critic discussing the similarities between *Funny Ha Ha* and *Frances Ha* writes: “one is about an awkward 20-something delaying adulthood, while her romantic planets fail to get in line. The other is ... well, yeah, pretty much about the same thing.”¹⁰⁹ Furthermore, *Girls*, *France Ha* and *Funny Ha Ha* all share a rambling tone, plots where not much happens and dialogue that trails off and is often inaudible; in the movies and television series nothing is definitive everything is only “sort-of” something—in short, they all share aspects of the wishy-washy.

In this context wishy-washiness aides newly graduated millennials who struggle to establish themselves professionally as the lead characters in these three works demonstrate. At times the wishy-washy aesthetic is embodied as an attempt to dismiss what is serious and intractable, while it also furnishes the filmic works with a zeitgeist-like tone. This chapter takes a close look at *Funny Ha Ha*’s relationship to the present day and cinematic manifestation of the wishy-washy, including how the wishy-washy is developed through the film’s influence on *Girls* and *Frances Ha*. Here, the wishy-washy, as personified by twenty-something female characters, is both feminized and infantilized.

¹⁰⁷ Eddie Pasa, “Movie Review: Frances Ha,” *Reel Film News* (blog), May 24, 2013, <http://www.reelfilmnews.com/2013/05/24/movie-review-frances-ha/>.

¹⁰⁸ For example, when asked about the connection in one interview Greta Gerwig says in Kevin Jagernauth, “Greta Gerwig Talks Making ‘Frances Ha,’ Comparisons to ‘Girls,’” *Indiewire*, June 12, 2013, <http://blogs.indiewire.com/theplaylist/greta-gerwig-talks-making-frances-ha-comparisons-to-girls-the-brewing-animated-movie-with-noah-baumbach-more-20130612>: “We wrote the film and made the film before *Girls* was on the air. So it was totally coincidental.”

¹⁰⁹ John Anderson, “Is There a Connection Between Baumbach’s ‘Frances Ha’ and Bujalski’s ‘Funny Ha Ha,’” *Indiewire*, May 15, 2013, <http://blogs.indiewire.com/thompsononhollywood/is-there-a-connection-between-baumbachs-frances-ha-and-bujalskis-funny-ha-ha>.

However, it is also embodied generally by the aesthetics of mumblecore, a film movement that *Funny Ha Ha* initiated. As with the wishy-washy in Victorian flower painting and the work of Maurizio Cattelan, there is strength in its presence here despite its weak veneer. Wishy-washiness provides a particular type of dignity for post-graduate millennials who are struggling to find a place—and often a job—in an austere, contemporary North America. In the first section of this chapter I define what wishy-washy means in this context. I examine what the aesthetic looks and feels like and how the term is used in reference to *Funny Ha Ha* and other mumblecore films in order to shed light on the particularities of its contemporary resonances. In the second section of this chapter I provide a brief history of the mumblecore film genre and its predecessors, thereby situating *Funny Ha Ha* within a lineage of similar films, yet also drawing attention to how the wishy-washy’s present inflection is symptomatic of the millennial generation. In the third section I analyze key “wishy-washy” aspects of *Funny Ha Ha*, rounded out by an analysis of how these aspects have been taken up in *Girls* and *Frances Ha*. This close examination shows how the wishy-washy is honed by those in their early career as a way to maintain dignity in the face of a stark and, often, inaccessible professional world. As a film with both a wishy-washy tone and character, *Funny Ha Ha* exemplifies the wishy-washy aesthetic of the present. Here, the wishy-washy comes across as weak and aimless, but it also provides a source of quiet strength for the characters and films that embody it.

Just Bopping Along: Popular use of “wishy-washy” and meaning in this context

As well as being about conflicted love, *Funny Ha Ha* is also about unemployment. The camera’s loose eye (at times lingering, at times choppy) follows lead character Marnie as she navigates her lack of stable employment, along the way losing jobs, potential love interests and friends who are more established. With its countless stammerings and trailings off, the dialogue seems improvised, though it is not, a situation that is exacerbated by the vocals being low in the sound mix and by the audio’s tininess. Filmed

on a handheld 16mm camera, the look of the film is governed by this technology: referencing documentary film, cinéma vérité and the French New Wave. In *Funny Ha Ha* the scenes often lack establishing shots and stop abruptly before they have a chance to get going. Combined these elements index a contemporary instantiation of wishy-washiness.

These aesthetic characteristics, in turn, influenced and have come to define the mumblecore film movement. Although it was filmed in 2002, *Funny Ha Ha* was not distributed until 2005 (and even then only in a limited way). And, despite its acclaimed influence, the film was never widely successful or popular. *Funny Ha Ha* did, however, establish Andrew Bujalski, its writer and director, as the godfather of the mumblecore movement.¹¹⁰

This movement can be described as a loose grouping of American independent films produced in the early 2000s with micro-budgets, unprofessional actors (who are usually friends of the director), wandering and choppy camerawork, plotless plots and twenty-something characters who ramble along in post-college malaise. Named for the inaudibility of the sound and, also, the way the characters seem to swallow their words with their trailing dialogue that is heavily punctuated with “ums,” “ahs” “likes” and “I guesses,” mumblecore films embody the wishy-washy aesthetic with their personalities and tone. With their weakness and aimlessness of both characters and cinematic devices, the aesthetics of mumblecore are also inflected (so to speak) with a wishy-washiness that is specific to the millennial generation.

“If you think the characters here are wishy washy, check out the directing,” writes a critic reviewing *Uncle Kent* (2011), a mumblecore film from the most prolific director of the mumblecore movement, Joe Swanberg.¹¹¹ Although I apply the “wishy-washy” label to these films, as sampled here, I am not the first to do so. The following are some examples of how “wishy-washy” is used in relation to mumblecore. For instance, one critic

¹¹⁰ “A Brief History of Mumblecore.” *Filmmaker - the Magazine of Independent Film* 15, no. 3 (Spring, 2007): 44. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/2311184?accountid=15115>.

¹¹¹ “Sundance 2011 Film Review: *Uncle Kent*,” *BlogCritics*, January 28, 2011, <https://blogcritics.org/sundance-2011-film-review-uncle-kent/>.

describes these films as coming from “the land of the mumble,” which he defines as consisting of: “wishy-washy characters who don't know what they want or need and in any case barely have the energy to go after it.”¹¹² In contrast, David Edelstein, writing in *New York Magazine*, suggests there is strength in the aesthetic, stating that the movement has “everything to do with attack—or the wishy-washy lack of it.”¹¹³ However, it is Lincoln Flynn, while analyzing *Frances Ha* for his film blog the *In/visible Work*, who provides a deeper understanding of the broader cultural concerns embedded in this wishy-washiness. He writes:

Frances, with all of her peculiar and wishy-washy ways, is very much a product of sociological circumstances caused by the paradoxical, triple-action influences of increasing life-expectancy, the exhaustive nature of Post-Post-Modern thinking and the cultural institution of Perpetual Youthfulness. She needs to grow-out [sic] of her current state—which involves being in a codependent, homosocial yet slightly unhealthy relationship with Sophie— but it’s hard to individuate when you can’t find your place in a confusing culture of ‘adulthood,’ much less interpret the intentions of and emulate your painfully hip peers. Things get tricky when the idea of being a grown-up feels fluxed.¹¹⁴

Indeed, the wishy-washy aesthetics of mumblecore index a contemporary situation familiar to many post-college North American millennials, a subject that will be further examined in the following sections of this chapter. However, for the purpose of defining what exactly is meant by “wishy-washy” in references to mumblecore films I would like to now turn to what the wishy-washy looks and feels like.

¹¹² James van Maanen, “Swanberg’s return to m’core, *Uncle Kent*, inaugurates this year’s Sundance at home,” *TrustMovies* (blog), January 22, 2011, <http://trustmovies.blogspot.ca/2011/01/swanbergs-return-to-mcore-uncle-kent.html>.

¹¹³ David Edelstein, “Baghead,” *New York Magazine*, July 28, 2008, <http://nymag.com/listings/movie/baghead/>.

¹¹⁴ Lincoln Flynn, “*France Ha* (2012, dir. Noah Baumbach),” *In/visible Work: Film Writings* (blog), May 26, 2013, <http://invisibleworkfilmwritings.tumblr.com/post/51443626847/frances-ha-2012-dir-noah-baumbach>.

Marnie walks into a tattoo parlor in the opening scene of *Funny Ha Ha*. She looks around, half-dazed. The proprietor asks her if she wants to get a tattoo. While her unfocused gaze scans the shop she slowly replies: “Yeah. I was thinking about getting a tattoo.” And when he asks her if she knows what tattoo she’d like, she responds in the same languid drawl: “Ah....No. But, I...I..., I’m thinking about it right now.” She asks about the tattoos that have the “(ahhhh)...interlacing, stuff” and the tattoo artist gives her a book of Celtic designs. She finally decides on a cow (because “it’s nice”) despite a half-hearted, hesitant look on her face. The tattoo artist discovers that this would be her first tattoo and questions if she has properly thought this through, to which she replies: “Oh, I’ve thought about it.” Despite this, her tone suggests otherwise. Ultimately the tattoo artist picks up on her iffiness about the procedure and turns her away for being drunk. “You always get the wrong thing,” he concludes. “You’ll say that for the rest of your life.”¹¹⁵

Marnie’s wishy-washiness stems from neither her indecision nor her oscillation about getting a tattoo, although both of these aspects play a part in conveying this disposition. Rather, it comes from her weak, half-hearted alliance to all options and her inability to commit to one thing. She very easily could get a tattoo, a permanent marking that she would bear for life. But, just as easily, she would be satisfied with not getting one; she seems to not have a strong opinion about either option. Instead, she is “just bopping along” (as one friend later notes with envy while comparing her life to his life’s structured work-oriented routine) with no clear direction; rather than making and following a plan, she seems to just respond to whatever comes her way, often changing direction without any decisiveness or strong feeling. However, in an exchange directly following the tattoo scene, Marnie tellingly asks a friend if he can help her get a job and confesses that she’s just been fired, shedding further light on the possible cause of her wishy-washy behaviour in the tattoo shop. Meanwhile, the unfocused, unobtrusive camera eye that lacks close ups or decisive cuts emphasizes the wishy-washy feeling. Rather than shaping the shot, the camera frame feels like it is shaped by the (lack of)

¹¹⁵ Andrew Bujalski, *Funny Ha Ha*, DVD, (2002; New York: Wellspring, 2005), 16 mm.

action in the scene. Ultimately, it reads as weak. Thus, although oscillation and indecision often surface in the wishy-washiness displayed here, it is ultimately an aesthetic of weakness.

The low audio and “mumbled” dialogue also contribute to the affective quality of wishy-washiness in *Funny Ha Ha*. The muffled audio cuts out frequently and the dialogue is so muddled that is often impossible to know for certain what is being said. For example, Lena Dunham, the creator of the television show *Girls*, cites *Funny Ha Ha* as one of her favourite movies, yet she is still uncertain what the last line of the film is, and that is part of the point. During her introduction to Anthology Film Archives’ tenth anniversary presentation of the film she noted that in an attempt to decipher the movie’s last line she “rewound the movie's final scene 11 times when she first watched it.”¹¹⁶ Meanwhile, Bujalski called this ambiguous audio “a typifying detail.”¹¹⁷ Indeed, throughout the film there is no clear, decisive speech, no affirmative statements or authoritative pronouncements. Instead there are just, well, mumblings.

Deliberately and consistently indecipherable, the poor sound quality and mumbled lines play a significant role in creating the film’s tone. Furthermore, they suggest that what is said matters less than how it is expressed: a distance between the speaker, the dialogue and the audience is created where what is being said could be interpreted as too overwhelming to deal with directly, thus out of sensitivity and empathy the speech has transformed to murmurs and the sound has been muffled. In any case, the cumulative effect spreads an atmosphere of wishy-washiness through the film, which the viewer feels even when things seem to be happening in the plot.

¹¹⁶ Dan Rosenblum, “Director Andrew Bujalski celebrates 10 years of *Funny Ha Ha* with a big fan, Lena Dunham,” *Capital New York*, December 7, 2012, <http://www.capitalnewyork.com/article/culture/2012/12/6795936/director-andrew-bujalski-celebrates-10-years-funny-ha-ha-big-fan-len>.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

Influenced and Influential: *Funny Ha Ha*'s predecessors and successors

The “typifying” way of communicating and poor sound quality that Bujalski notes in *Funny Ha Ha* is perhaps the film’s most influential technical device for the mumblecore movement, while the aimless, post-college protagonist is one of the film’s most significant tropes, inspiring similar characters in many subsequent cinematic works. Although *Funny Ha Ha*’s most immediate impact occurred within mumblecore films, it also inspired later works like *Frances Ha* and *Girls*. In this section I will discuss the film’s influence on later works such as these, to create a fuller picture of the wishy-washy aesthetic. However, first, I’d like to situate *Funny Ha Ha* within a historic trajectory of cinema and highlight what aspects of the film are unique to the context of the millennial generation.

Aesthetically, *Funny Ha Ha* can look like a cinema vérité documentary. For instance, the absence of a sound track, seemingly improvised dialogue and the sense that the actors are playing themselves (although this is not actually the case), sets up numerous resonances with cinema vérité. However, the heavy-handed philosophic concern with truth that preoccupied many directors of cinema vérité is hardly a driving force for Bujalski’s *Funny Ha Ha*.¹¹⁸ At the same time Bujalski does cite documentary filmmaking’s subordination to chance as influential. In a recent interview he says: “I do believe that documentary is the purest sort of filmmaking — inasmuch as the lessons it teaches about shaping material that ultimately is not 100% under your control, not anywhere near it, are applicable to all forms of filmmaking”¹¹⁹ This open approach to writing and directing helps to explain some aspects of the wandering, yet choppy camera’s eye in *Funny Ha Ha*. However, this method of writing and directing assumes that the action unfolds at its own pace and the characters speak in their own voice with their own words and that there

¹¹⁸ Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary*, (Indiana University Press: Indiana, 1991), 38-9.

¹¹⁹ Paul Bower, “Andrew Bujalski: Interview,” *Tine Mix Tapes*, June 2012, <http://www.tinemixtapes.com/features/andrew-bujalski>.

is little influence from the director. Yet this explanation fails to account for the film's unified vision. *Funny Ha Ha* has a singular wishy-washy tone throughout, which suggests the film is more the work of an auteur than a fly-on-the-wall documentary director. After all, for all of the mishaps of dialogue and camera work, the film is still very much scripted and edited; the actors play characters, not themselves and the plot is scripted fiction, not reality captured on camera.

With *Funny Ha Ha*'s aesthetic similarities to cinema vérité, coupled with the strong presence of Bujalski's directorial thumbprint and its independence from mainstream film studios, the work of John Cassavetes is, perhaps, the most obvious comparison to draw. In fact, this association is made frequently.¹²⁰ Both directors self-financed and independently produced their work, created character driven films, used people they knew as actors and allowed their actors some control over their dialogue and used natural lighting.

However, these similarities in approach do not necessarily result in a similarity of tone. For Cassavetes' films deal with bold, powerful and often violent characters that are loud and angry, whereas *Funny Ha Ha*'s characters are quiet, subtle and passive. As one film critic from the *New York Times* explains the difference between a Cassavetes film and *Funny Ha Ha*: "Cassavetes's characters are often at the mercy of their feelings and pushed to the point of eruption, Mr. Bujalski's are cut off from theirs, and able to communicate only by painful, semi-ironic indirection."¹²¹ Furthermore, the overall feeling and pace of *Funny Ha Ha* is quieter and weaker by comparison: Cassavetes films have plots that build and go places and there are grand gestures where the action in *Funny Ha Ha* has a minor tone and character's meander aimlessly. Though Cassavetes

¹²⁰ For examples of the comparisons between Cassavetes and Bujalski see A. O. Scott, "Postgraduate Depression, When True Love Is as Elusive as High Pay and Low Rent," *The New York Times*, April 29, 2005; Cheryl Eddy, "Real Genius: DIY sensation Funny Ha Ha operates at the speed of life," *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, August 1, 2005; Chris Tinkham, "Andrew Bujalski: Writer and director of *Mutual Appreciation*," *Under the Radar*, September 1, 2006, http://www.undertheradarmag.com/interviews/andrew_bujalski_interview_092006/.

¹²¹ A. O. Scott, "Postgraduate Depression, When True Love Is as Elusive as High Pay and Low Rent," *The New York Times*, April 29, 2005, http://www.nytimes.com/2005/04/29/movies/29haha.html?_r=0.

undeniably paved a way for independent American cinema and Bujalski follows in this lineage, *Funny Ha Ha* sets itself apart mostly due to the wishy-washy aesthetic that penetrates it.

The generational shift that wishy-washiness indexes is further driven home upon an examination of the inaptness of the term “Slackavetes,” an expression that critics have used to describe mumblecore films. The term conflates Cassavetes with *Slacker*, a low-fi, plotless, dialogue-heavy, 1990s film by Richard Linklater that brings together a motley crew of bohemians and misfits in Austin, Texas. However, “Slackavetes” implies that the characters of mumblecore are “slackers,” a term that was popularized and shaped in the 1990s by the movie. A slacker, as defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is “a person regarded as one of a large group or generation of young people (esp. in the early to mid 1990s) characterized by apathy, aimlessness, and lack of ambition.”¹²² I would argue that the behaviour displayed in *Funny Ha Ha* and mumblecore is more aptly described as wishy-washy, and this has more to do with the context of the millennial generation and less to do with a slacker’s lazy disposition. Though many of the characters seem aimless they tend to be neither without ambition nor apathetic in the same way that a slacker of the 1990s is thought of as being. If they lack stable, full-time jobs, it is not because they are not looking for them. In fact, many mumblecore storylines have finding a job or working as a central concern—and wishy-washiness often helps the characters deal with this unstable situation by allowing them to juggle various precarious jobs and roles and shift swiftly between them. Though their best efforts often lead them nowhere, having best efforts in the first place sets them apart from the slackers of the 1990s.

Discerning how *Funny Ha Ha* is unique in its wishy-washy ways can also be approached from a different angle: by tracing how the film has been influential on later filmic works, specifically the mumblecore movement, the television series *Girls* and the film *Frances Ha*. *Funny Ha Ha*’s influence on the mumblecore movement has been well established.

¹²² “Slacker,” *Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 20 vols. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989, <http://www.oed.com/>.

The film is widely considered the movement's first work and generator.¹²³ Meanwhile, film critic Amy Taubin once described Bujalski as "a poet of demurral, hesitation, and noncommitment," and this aspect of his films is a defining characteristic of the personalities who populate later mumblecore films.¹²⁴ Furthermore, key mumblecore director Joe Swanberg admitted to making his movie *Kissing on the Mouth* (2005) as a direct response to *Funny Ha Ha* and he paid further homage to Bujalski by getting him to star in his film *Hannah Takes the Stairs* (2007).¹²⁵ However, underlying the widely discussed similarities, there is another aspect of *Funny Ha Ha* that is addressed time and again in later mumblecore films although it is not usually overtly discussed. Namely, joblessness often underpins the character's wishy-washy behaviour. David Denby astutely hints at this aspect when he opens an article on mumblecore in *The New Yorker* with: "You're about twenty-five years old, and you're no more than, shall we say, intermittently employed, so you spend a great deal of time talking with friends about trivial things or about love affairs that ended or never quite happened."¹²⁶ Key to this passage is that the "intermittent employment" causes the trivial talk and the excessive time hanging out with friends. In fact, unstable employment is a reoccurring theme in many mumblecore films. In *Hannah Takes the Stairs*, lead character Hannah works as a production intern whose love life echoes her unstable work situation. Again, in *Sorry, Thanks* (2009) (a film that also casts Bujalski) lead character Kira must pursue a job she hates, driving her to run aimless romantic loops.

Furthermore, if we examine *Funny Ha Ha*'s influence on *Girls* and *Frances Ha* the same pattern emerges. The establishing dilemma of *Girls* is that lead character Hannah has lost financial support from her parents and, as noted in this chapter's introduction, gets fired

¹²³ For example, David Denby, "Youthquake: Mumblecore Movies," *The New Yorker*, March 16, 2009, www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/cinema/2009/03/16/090316cerci_cinema_denby.

¹²⁴ Amy Taubin, "Mumblecore: All Talk?" *FilmComment*, November/December 2007, <http://www.filmcomment.com/article/all-talk-mumblecore>.

¹²⁵ Dennis Lim, "A Generation Finds Its Mumble," *The New York Times*, August 19, 2007, http://www.nytimes.com/2007/08/19/movies/19lim.html?8dpc&_r=0.

¹²⁶ David Denby, "Youthquake: Mumblecore Movies," *The New Yorker*, March 16, 2009, www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/cinema/2009/03/16/090316cerci_cinema_denby.

from her internship when she asks to be paid. This leads her through a series of episodes where she engages in such erratic behavior as drinking opium tea and showing up unannounced at her parent's hotel in the middle of the night, forcing them to read her essays in an attempt to get them to continue supporting her financially and proclaiming: "I think that I may be the voice of my generation...or, at least, *a* voice of *a* generation." Even in what should be Hannah's most confident and convincing assertion of her talents she feels she must detract from the definitiveness contained in the statement "the voice of my generation." Instead, she can't help but demur with "*a* voice of *a* generation."

Likewise, in *Frances Ha*, one of the central preoccupations for Frances is finding a job. While her friends establish themselves professionally (or are independently wealthy), Frances floats from one part-time, temporary job to another that she navigates with a wishy-washy, albeit happy-go-lucky and culturally astute disposition that endears her to her more established friends and affords her a certain amount of cultural capital: cheap rent at friend's apartments, part-time jobs and invitations to dinner parties. On a more superficial level, choice names in both *Girls* and *Frances Ha* pay tribute to *Funny Ha Ha* as well (*Girls* also has a lead character named Marnie after *Funny Ha Ha*'s Marnie and the similarity in the "Ha" and capitalized "F" of the first word of *Frances Ha*'s title makes it easy to confuse with *Funny Ha Ha*'s title). However, it is the similarity in the wishy-washy disposition of the lead characters and the meandering plots, camera work and dialogue that truly connect the works. In all three cases this wishy-washiness links to the inability to find meaningful work, a prolific problem for millennials, as the following section will further highlight.

Wishy Washy; *Funny Ha Ha*

Funny Ha Ha's lead character Marnie cannot find a permanent job—her situation in 2002 is a perceptive foretelling of the financial difficulties about to befall the millennial generation as permanent, full-time jobs erode for young people over the course of the following years. As Marnie watches her friends develop in both their professional and personal lives, she remains stuck, but not for lack of trying. As noted previously, wishy-

washiness permeates the film and allows Marnie a pathway into the professional world despite unfavourable prospects. In this section I analyze key “wishy-washy” scenes and cinematic devices present in *Funny Ha Ha*. Examining how wishy-washiness has been further developed in *Girls* and *Frances Ha* rounds out this analysis. Ultimately, wishy-washiness functions as a type of coping mechanism, honed by those in their early career as a way to maintain dignity in the face of a stark and, often, hostile professional world. As filmic works with both wishy-washy tones and characters, *Funny Ha Ha*, followed by *Girls* and *Frances Ha*, exemplify the wishy-washy aesthetic of the present. Here, the wishy-washy comes across as weak and aimless while providing dignity and quiet strength.

In the storyline that we can assume directly precedes the action of *Funny Ha Ha*, Marnie gets fired after asking for a raise. While visiting her friend Alex at his job, she breaks the news (“You got fired for asking for a raise?! Wow...What’d you...how?!”). When Alex asks Marnie what she’ll do now she responds with a half-hearted attempt to find employment at his workplace: “I’m just wandering the earth...And...I’m a, I guess I’m looking for a job. I mean: you guys aren’t hiring are you?” Alex turns her down: “No. I mean we’re looking for programmers and stuff, but...you don’t want to work here. You don’t want to work with me either...I can be over-demanding.” Marnie agrees, plays with her hair and laughs in response. Despite being turned down (something that she likely expects and is probably used to), she maintains her cheerful and agreeable, but also seemingly removed disposition. These actions draw on older—and rather problematic—constructions of femininity (i.e. plays with hair, laughs, still cheerful in face of adversity, etc.), however their goal seems to be to express her character’s passive and disaffected personality using a constellation of actions that at times overlap with constructions of femininity.

Later, as Marnie is walking down the street reading a magazine on her way home from the grocery store a couple of friends spot her and invite her along to their dinner engagement. She easily switches her own loose plans to theirs. The camera abruptly cuts from this bright, overlit scene to the dark interior of the van on the visibly bumpy drive to dinner. It begins mid-conversation, mid-sentence as one of the friends, Dave, discusses

his job and contrasts it to Marnie's life with envy: "day in, day out, ten hours in front of the monitor, fixing some crap that somebody broke...I wish I was you. I wish I had your lifestyle...you're just bopping along and friends pick you up and we're going to dinner. It just seems spontaneous." Marnie says, "Ah well, but c'mon, you're going to dinner too!" But, Alex objects: "But, for us, this is just what we're doing tonight. It's not spontaneous at all. It's just a commitment that we have." In this early scene Dave is establishing Marnie's wishy-washy disposition, especially in relation to that of her friends who all have jobs and are more secure in their personal lives. This wishy-washiness hinges on her flexible nature. She easily can change track, switch plans, adapt. Rather than coming from a commitment to openness, this versatility seems to come from a lack of commitment to any particular option or plan. This scene comes directly after she reveals that she's been fired and before she has moved on to a temp job. With this in mind, the lack of alliance and consequential openness can be read as a way of coping with needing to wear many hats in your early career. One needs to have a flexible nature, especially while aligned with a temp agency, to deal with the changing nature of everyday life. Furthermore, throughout the scene the audio cuts in and out, the van jumps up and down, but the camera remains fixed in the position at the rear of the van, facing the backs of all three characters. The haphazardness of the audio and the weakness—that is displayed in the cinematography through the camera's framing of the backs of heads, poorly lit or overexposed shots resulting in low contrast images where little can be made out—mirrors Marnie's wishy-washy disposition. These cinematic devices and Marnie's character continue along with the same wishy-washiness throughout the film.

Moreover, the problems deciphering the dialogue in *Funny Ha Ha* stems not only from the poor audio quality, but also from how the characters deliver their lines. Not only the viewers, but also other characters have trouble understanding what is being said. For example, when Marnie is talking to her friend Alex on the phone he asks her a question but clearly cannot understand her reply. In fact, it is so hard to hear her that he thinks they have become disconnected: "It was what? What? Hello?" Meanwhile, Alex has a tendency to mix his syntax: "It sounded like she was giving you some crazy regard...ummm, some crazy advise regarding me." These mumbled and seemingly flubbed lines, along with the inordinate amount of "ahs," "ums," "I guesses," "likes" and

other verbal tics, weaken the message of what the characters are saying and highlight the fact that the characters are neither deliberate nor definitive in how they feel and act. This verbal weakness runs the course of the film and greatly contributes to the film's wishy-washy aesthetic.

However, this verbal confusion is actually a key manifestation of the wishy-washy dilemmas' most salient point. For example, Alex's suspicion that their call has been disconnected underscores the metaphorical content of their stumbling speech. Indeed, it positions the metaphor of disconnection on the cusp of becoming literal. The exchange between Marnie and Alex is so broken that it risks breaking down completely. And it is at this point that the absence of emotion flips over into its opposite. The content of the conversation is completely obvious: Alex wants to tell Marnie that, despite what she has been told, he does not have any feelings for her—he does not have a crush on her. But, as is often the case, the true point of his conversation is not to convince Marnie that he has no feelings for her, but to convince himself that he has no feelings for her. And here we come to the true significance of the wishy-washy sensibility for its moment in the early twenty-first century: the point of the inability to articulate feelings that these films thematize is not that we do not have feelings, but that we do. And that, in fact, we experience these feelings with an unprecedented intensity that makes us fear them.

Thus, the local importance of Alex's feelings for Marnie that comes out late in the film—that he already has chosen to sacrifice emotional comfort for financial comfort by marrying someone who, while less compelling than Marnie emotionally, comes from a wealthy family—operates metonymically as a symptom of our era's emotional register. Thus, the classic mechanism of emotional denial (I love you means I hate you and I hate you means I love you, as Lacan says) has, in postmodernism's aftermath, been heightened to a second order of intensity. As Slavoj Žižek, building on Lacan's formulation, observes of this new emotional condition, nothing is more confusing for us now than for someone to actually tell us what they feel. Žižek summarizes this difference as follows: under modernity, if a child told his parents that he did not want to visit his

grandmother, the reaction would be, “Tough, you are going anyway.”¹²⁷ In the shadow of postmodernism, however, the parental reaction would be to attempt to mollify the child: your grandmother loves you, when you grow up, you’ll realize how lucky you were to have shared this time with her, and so on. In other words, under the guise of being empathetic, the postmodern response delegitimizes the child’s feelings, thus laying the groundwork for a lifetime of expectation that, especially with respect to emotions, one never says what one means. In this instant, for example, the child learns that the correct response to the question “Are you ready to go to grandma’s house?” is “Oh, yes!”—regardless of his true feelings.

Thus, the Lacanian “I love you means I hate you and I hate you means I love you” now is on the cusp of shifting from an unconscious mechanism to a conscious one, so that the only way Alex can tell Marnie that he loves her is to emphasize that she means nothing to him at all. And as we see in one of their final scenes together—a happenstance encounter in a health food store—his message came through loud and clear. (Though, at the same time, we can see that the Lacanian mechanism has not disappeared completely: when Alex tells Marnie that she has received bad advice, he most certainly means she has received good advice—in fact, almost too good, since if she acts on it she will confront him with the unbearable intensity of his emotions for her. And here again, she proves herself equal to the task of deciphering the latent content: she does not act on the advice and, in so doing, opens the way for Alex finally to reveal his true feelings for her in the store precisely because it is too late—he has eloped with someone else—and therefore safe.)

Following this logic, the wishy-washy dialogue, camera work and personality traits do not necessarily mean that the characters are without determination or drive. In fact, appearing to be uninterested, noncommittal and weak can be an indication that one’s feelings are of an extremely intense nature. And, it is this intensity that leads to the truth

¹²⁷ Slavoj Žižek in Astra Taylor, *Žižek!*, DVD (2005; United States: Hidden Driver Productions).

getting flubbed and washed out, so to speak. Ultimately, the intensity can provoke wishy-washy reactions in an attempt to diminish the feeling's frightening significance.

To be sure, in *Funny Ha Ha*, although life's prospects can seem hopeless, wishy-washiness aids in keeping a positive and light attitude rather than letting a dire situation bring one down and further exacerbate the problem. In this sense, wishy-washiness can be said to function as a kind of determination and resilience in the face of a desperate situation—essentially as a type of coping mechanism. This comes across clearly during a conversation between Marnie and Alex at the film's end. Marnie asks in what seems like a response to their current desperate situations: "Hey, if you could move anywhere, if you were moving out of here, just anywhere in the country, or anywhere I guess, where would you move?" Alex, who is just as wishy-washy as Marnie at heart, sidesteps the directness of the question, yet mumbles his way through an answer that is equally as honest: "I dunno. I guess a better question is: if you were thirteen feet tall, would you rather be that or have eyes on the stalks of your head?" Characteristic of Alex, he has fumbled his syntax. However, although they laugh at the silliness of the response there is also an element of truth for both of them present in the statement—flubbed sentences and all. The chances of them getting out their respective current personal and professional ruts is a moot point. They are here and deep in it and the best thing they can do, perhaps, is to keep their wishy-washy spirits up and keep at it.

Indeed, what Marnie really wants is to get her life together. She demonstrates this by creating "to do" lists and her mood reaches its zenith of happiness when she is offered a research position. Furthermore, aspects of her wishy-washiness make her adaptable for various entry-level positions, importantly including jobs with great potential in her area of interest. As a professor interviewing Marnie for a research position notes while scanning her resume: "You've got very broad interests." Although Marnie agrees that she "sound[s] a little bit scattered," she is offered the job. Later she notes just how important getting this job was for her: "It came at a good time. I had about negative \$2 in my bank account." Here, her wishy-washiness could be said to contribute to getting her a job that she really needs while at the same time allowing her to remain open and unfazed had she not got the job.

Directly referencing Marnie's predicament in *Funny Ha Ha*, in the opening scene of the pilot episode of *Girls* Hanna, the show's main character, is told by her parents that they can no longer support her financially. She is devastated: "Do you know how crazy the economy is right now? I mean, all my friends get help from their parents." For over a year, she has been working at an unpaid internship, hoping that it will turn into a paid position. Following her parent's revelation, she promptly seeks out her boss to ask to be hired on. After she works up the nerve to approach him, he wearily notes with disapproval, "You seem eager." Though he admits her significance to the company ("you are an invaluable part of our operation"), he signals the end of her time there when she tells him she no longer can work without pay. She clarifies that she's not quitting and that she was just suggesting that she be paid. Clearly unimpressed, her boss says, "In this economy, do you know how many internship requests I get everyday? It's about 50! I practically route them into my spam folder, so if you think you just have nothing left to learn from us..." Although Hannah tries to explain her position—"It's not that. I just, you know, got to eat"—her boss swiftly dismisses her.

Likewise, *France Ha* also references the *Funny Ha Ha* scene when Frances, the show's lead character, works up the nerve to ask the director at the dance company where she teaches for more work. Although she offers Frances the use of studio space, the director is "all full up" and doesn't have any teaching spots available. However, she says that she might be able to use Frances in the Christmas show—a prospect that excites Frances. It allows her to take a room in some friends' apartment at a reduced rate with the understanding that she will be able to pay the full rate once the Christmas show starts. Later the dance company director retracts her offer, "We won't be able to use you in the Christmas show." This false promise of future work is arguably even more detrimental than the straight-up firing in *Funny Ha Ha* and *Girls* as it gives Frances hope and influences decisions she makes in her life concerning her financial situation.

This trope that begins with *Funny Ha Ha* and is taken up by *Girls* and *Frances Ha* importantly references the precariousness of employment for recent graduates. One risks being fired for showing any indication of dissatisfaction with one's current position, including asking to be paid—let alone paid fairly. It is a situation that is particularly

experienced by young employees who are just trying to carve out their profession and are especially vulnerable. As with *Funny Ha Ha*, the lead characters in *Girls* and *Frances Ha* also maintain their wishy-washiness while trying to make it in a cutthroat professional world. It allows them to jump from one job to another with ease while maintaining an unfazed appearance, a skill that is essential for those working multiple unsecured jobs. For example, in *Girls*, while Hannah is at a job interview she cannot stop talking, jumping from one topic to another, while the interviewer is trying to look at her resume, possibly to cover for her lack of paid experience. Later, she takes a job at a coffee shop, but wears a pristine white dress, an outfit more appropriate to an office. She agrees to do a reading of her writing but scraps her original story for something she wrote on the subway on the way there. She takes a freelance writing job where she is encouraged to do things outside of her comfort zone, such as doing drugs and participating in sexual adventures. This leads her to befriend her drug addict neighbour, do cocaine in the middle of the afternoon and other activities that contribute to her seeming all over the place and indecisiveness. Ultimately, Hannah comes across as a wishy-washy character who struggles to get her career started and to survive—although she can appear flakey at first glance, like Marnie in *Funny Ha Ha*, she is resilient and driven and her wishy-washiness aides her in the necessary precarity of her early career.

In *Frances Ha*, Frances' wishy-washiness is her defining character trait and also the main source of her strength. As with Marnie in *Funny Ha Ha*, most of Frances' friends are financially stable, yet Frances is struggling to get by. Her wishy-washiness, though, endears her to friends who share their apartments and resources with her. Also, like Marnie, she bounces around with no clear direction—she travels to Paris for the weekend on a whim, takes various temporary, part-time jobs at her former college, dances clumsily in the street. However, for all of her apparent flakiness, Frances is not a weak character. She is driven by her desire to dance and choreograph and, through all her stumbling, she never gives up. Ultimately, she secures her own apartment and successfully choreographs a dance performance, without sacrificing her wishy-washiness. Indeed, it is still present in her final act: clumsily labeling her mailbox with too large a font so that only the first two letters of her last name appear (hence “Frances Ha”). Rather than fix it, Frances is happy with the mistake.

The similar wishy-washy disposition of Frances, Hannah and Marnie together form a new character type that is familiar to many millenials: the wishy-washy woman in her early career, juggling many precarious jobs. Although many males find themselves in the same position and resort to the same wishy-washiness, precarious career situations seem to be felt most saliently among young women, as this character references. She embodies traditional constructions of femininity (this is clear from the title of *Girls* alone, not to mention the many other filmic works with “girl” appearing in the title), but it is a conscious decision that tactically enables her to preform fancy footwork around the varied conditions of contemporary life. Her wishy-washiness is, perhaps, as appropriate of a response as one can have to the situation that is dealt to recent graduates in the new Neoliberal economy. It helps one cope with the varied roles one has to play early in adulthood, while allowing one to maintain the ability to make life choices without seeming ungrateful and or risking being fired. Just as wishy-washiness in Victorian flower painting and in the work of Maurizio Cattalan contains a subtle strength, here, too, the wishy-washy is a way to navigate the various hoops one needs to jump through in their early career.

Concluding Thoughts

I first approached the aesthetics of the wishy-washy because I found it prevalent in our contemporary situation. Everywhere I looked I saw things that were neither here nor there, people speaking in ways that avoided any assertive pronouncements or commitments, a happy go-luckiness that at first seemed weak. As I delved deeper into the aesthetic and its history I discovered that, although it is positioned as an aesthetic of weakness, it is often used in a tactical way and thus holds a certain strength. Not only that, I also discovered that the term has a history that goes back over 300 years to the 1600s, despite its very contemporary resonance. Since its earliest use the wishy-washy has foremost been defined in terms of weakness. However, this defining weakness has been used to powerful ends—as a means of delaying meaning in *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, a way that women could acceptably access the painting world in the

Victorian period, a tactic that sustains attention and increases art world value for Maurizio Cattelan and as a way to navigate the early career years in *Funny Ha Ha* and other mumblecore films. I selected these key moments to examine, although they are far from the only instances of the wishy-washy. My aim has been to show that the wishy-washy is a prevalent aesthetic that is worth examining for both its supposed weakness and its hidden strength.

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